

Before the Storm

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[Harry Potter/Tom Riddle](#)

Characters:

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Before the Storm

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

“Go.” She said, not quite yelling but suddenly intense as she herded Harry back, away from the pillar and towards the tracks. “Go now, boy, or you’ll miss your train!”

He looked behind his shoulder, there was a train....he hadn’t heard it approach. The doors were open and waiting, and for no good reason at all, he stepped inside. The strange little woman didn’t follow him on, she simply stood there watching him. that same incomprehensible smile on her face.

“Which path will you choose?” She asked again, just before the doors closed, replacing his view of her with his own, pale reflection.

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Sirius was gone, and Harry's world was crumbling through his fingers. All he wanted was a little peace, just a moment to himself.

Maybe it was a wish come true.

Maybe it was just the machinations of a strange little witch and her enchanted locket.

When Harry found himself, now fifty years in the past, on his birthday he doesn't question it too much.

He just take the opportunities set before him.

Notes

Hello dears!! Welcome to a new story!!!

For those of you waiting for an update for [Hidden](#) and [Cherry Blossom Winter](#) I'm sorry this isn't it. Hidden should be up soon though, but this...this just wouldn't leave me alone.

So, New Story!!

Not only that but my first time actually writing for Harry Potter and not just an AU. How exciting!!!

I had planned to come here and say that I had no idea where this would lead, and much of the middle bits I'm still not sure of. BUT just last night the ending came to me....sooo....It'll probably continue one way or another. Not super happy with the summary....I never am though. The overall feel here is healing. Harry needs a hug and I'm here to help see that he gets it!!!

I promise much fluff to come, sorry for the sad bits to start us off.

This takes place between the fifth and sixth books for starts, probably closer to the start of the sixth book. Tom will be one year older than Harry, in case there was anyone wondering. As a general disclaimer, I do not care much for the movies, and I haven't read the books since the last one came out. I'm gonna try to fact check some, but pretty much if it didn't happen in a book, I'm not too concerned with it.

since so much of this story hasn't been hashed out yet, really these first few scenes just jumped out at me and wouldn't let go. I would love to hear what y'all might want to see. Keeping in mind the general idea of fluff and growth and healing.

As always I can't remember the things I had wanted to say about this first chapter....Please let me know if there are any questions and concerns. And thank you so much for reading!!

(I have no beta, so apologies for any and all mistakes that might be there)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Prologue/Chapter One

Prologue

The chamber wavered before his eyes. Every deep, shuddering breath bringing the candles flame into sharper relief. Through the pain, the disorientation, the world took slow shape around him once again.

He wouldn't focus on the ringing in his ears.

Or how the candle light had been brighter, warmer, before.

Before.

He thought he would feel stronger afterwards. Powerful. Wasn't that the point of the ritual? To come out the other side with a stronger hold over his own life? He wasn't going to be a puppet for fate, he had long since resolved to not leave anything to chance. He was strong! He had more power within him than any two wizards combined. He was Slytherin's heir, he was above all!

Even death.

On the chamber floor just a foot away from where he crouched, hand on his chest to keep the agony back, lay his journal. To anyone else it was just a useless book, worn leather with his name on the cover, blank pages, unassuming. Boring.

For Tom, it breathed. It thrummed with magic. His magic. It called to him. A mournful melody set to the drip, drip, drip, echoes of falling water on the chamber floor. It had been a tedious affair to get back in when school was out. In the end though he knew it would be worth it. There was no where else such a ritual should be performed. These rooms belonged to Tom and no one else. It had just seemed right.

He had planned it all out ahead of time, always finding comfort in being prepared. He would apparate to Hogsmeade, sneak back into the castle through one of the secret passages, avoid being noticed in the nearly empty halls, and enter the Chamber of Secrets. Simple. For someone like Tom it was almost too easy. It hadn't even been a challenge. Once the chamber had sealed behind him he had laughed in triumph, setting out the area for his ritual with a spring in his step.

Now, though. It was just dark. The damp seeping through his robes, freezing him to the bone. It hadn't been this cold when he'd begun, he was sure of it. The idea of leaving now, of traveling back to London, was daunting. His legs shook beneath him as he tried to stand, once, twice, three times before he had to give in and give up.

The deed was done. He was supposed to feel powerful at having taken the first step to best death. He was not supposed to be reduced to this weak, trembling creature.

A furious sound escaped him then. A roar. A cry. He couldn't tell. It reverberated around him for what felt like hours before fading to nothing, as he lay there, panting. Marginally relieved from the release. He hated this. The whole point was to take control, to never feel weak again!

With a great effort he calmed his breathing, the chamber settled once more around him. This was just a minor setback. He would have to stay in the chamber for a night, but he would be better in the morning. He had to be. He would rest now, finding comfort in the knowledge that no one need ever know about this.

That he hadn't the strength to stand, couldn't even conjure a blanket or charm to keep the chill at bay.

Eventually he lowered himself to the cold floor, stringently ignoring the ever present layer of water as he stretched out. The chamber spun around him, forcing him to close his eyes to the now dancing flames. In the dark he reached over, hand finding the journal instantly. It still sang to him. And though he did not plan to test it, he had the feeling that no matter where the book was, he would always be able to feel it. To find it.

He clutched it to his chest, over the pounding of his heart, where the rip in his chest ached like a tangible wound. Almost he could feel the piece of his now ragged soul trying to return from the book. He refused to let it...but having it so near the rip helped. Slowly his breaths evened out, the pain receded.

Alone in the chamber, resting on a bed of cold wet stone, surrounded by nothing but fragile candle light, Tom Riddle cradled the book that held a precious sliver of his soul and finally gave in to sleep.

The platform shook as another train came barreling down the tracks, and for a quick, breathless moment all was noise and blustery chaos until, just as suddenly as it had arrived, the train passed, pandemonium following in its wake. In the train's absence everything felt calmer than before. Families moved once more across the platform, vendors smiled and sold their wares, and Harry Potter stood against a pillar, watching it all.

He hadn't moved since he'd entered the Underground, he had no plans to either. No train passing by could take him where he wanted to go. There was no destination that he felt even a glimmer of desire to see. Then again, traveling hadn't been the reason he'd chosen this location. It was dark, and despite the roaring of the passing trains, it was mostly quiet. He would be left alone here, but not lonely.

Harry smiled as a small family passed before him, the mother and father each holding one of their child's hands. Every now and then they would lift her up so that her next step met only air. Peals of laughter echoed through the station, other passersby glancing their way with fond smiles until the family moved on. It was good to see, to know. That even with the recent attacks, bridges that suddenly broke like brittle glass, freak tornadoes out of clear skies, sinkholes, and a new strain of the flu that so far resisted all treatments. Despite all that, there was still joy in the world.

As little as it was.

More often than not the people that walked past did so quickly with their heads down, careful to not touch or talk to anyone else. That suited him well enough as well. Everyone was too concerned with making it home in one piece to really care much about a lone teen just minding his own business. Which was exactly what he wanted.

He just....really needed time to be alone. Or well, away from Privet Drive. All summer his family had been just as callous and awful as ever until finally he had reached his limit for the Dursleys. For everything really. But especially for Vernon storming in, yelling about drills or whatever. As though that was what was important. Poor Vernon Dursley and his terribly hard life of drill selling.

Harry sighed, hugging his arms close to his chest to chase away the chill and perpetual fatigue. The anger he'd felt at having Sirius ripped away from him had been swift and destructive. White hot and furious,

it had burned quick and bright, consuming everything in its path. He had destroyed Dumbledore's office, raged like he'd never done before. Not that he could recall most of it. His memory of that time was hazy at best, and often since that night he was glad for it. Sirius' death, learning that he had been prophesied since birth to kill Voldemort, having to return to life as though his heart hadn't fallen through the veil as well....it had been too much.

But the hottest flames truly did burn out swiftly, His anger was gone, vanished once everything began to calm down around him. What was left behind wasn't quite pain or sorrow, but a hollow, frozen reflection of both. Not quite substantial. Ephemeral. Sneaking moments when all he could remember was the blue light of the Ministry, the look of fear in Sirius' dark eyes before he fell. Then there was nothing but the cold.

The cold was now a constant companion of his. Even in the middle of summer he'd been forced to wear his thickest sweaters, though they did little to keep him from constantly shivering.

He was getting used to being cold.

Every now and then he scanned the crowd, looking for something more nefarious than businessmen, students, and families. He knew it wasn't safe to be out lately. Especially for him. But despite the danger, despite the letter Dumbledore had written to him telling him to stay put. That he would come and retrieve Harry after his birthday. He just couldn't stay inside.

He may have a room now, but he could never shake the knowledge that he was just few steps away from that dreaded cupboard. And after....well after everything, the walls of his tiny room had started feeling closer than ever. He didn't think he could have stayed in there any longer. And he didn't want to sit around, waiting for Dumbledore to show up. Take him from one prison to another. For he feared that Dumbledore would try to take him to Grimmauld place so that the Order could watch over him until he could flee to Hogwarts once more.

He never wanted to go back to Grimmauld place again.

He'd return to the Dursley's soon, wait for Dumbledore's arrival the following evening and request to be sent to the Burrow instead. He didn't fancy waiting out the summer surrounded by his friends and the pity that had been in their eyes when they had parted at King's Cross.

But it was better than the alternative.

It had to be.

“It didn’t have to be like this.”

Harry jumped at the small raspy voice, looked around frantically for the source before his gaze dropped down to a very tiny lady that had snuck up on him. Harry was small. Five years of regular meals while at school could in no way fix eleven years of near starvation. He had long since accepted his lot in life as ‘petite’, but if he was small then this woman was minuscule. Her small form was wrapped in so many shawls it was impossible to see much of her body, though her face was tan and rosy, lined with age, and she looked up at him with large violet eyes.

“I um, beg your pardon?” He asked, confused. She wasn’t the first elder traveler who had tried to speak with him. Though those had asked him if he was lost or needed help, concern coloring their inquiries. This, was something completely different.

“It didn’t have to end up this way.” She repeated, just as enigmatically as the first time.

She was crazy. That was clear enough. Harry plastered a smile on his face and nodded sagely. “I’m sure it didn’t.” Should he call someone? There was a vendor just a few feet away selling meat pies, surely he had a phone. There was probably a security guard somewhere in the station....

“Some, when given the opportunity to fix things, squander their chances. Some turn and walk away from fate.”

“Tragic.” Harry said, mostly because he thought it would mollify her if he seemed to agree. Surreptitiously he looked around for anyone who may have misplaced their wandering grandmother.

They all avoided catching his eye.

“Some take the chance, and the world is always better for it.” She smiled at him then, toothy, bright. Somehow knowing, as though they shared a secret. “And they themselves are always better for it as well.” He nodded absently, only half listening to her.

“What will you choose?”

He snapped back to attention as she took one of his hands and shoved something cold and round into it. “Wha-” He started to say but she cut him off.

“Go.” She said, not quite yelling but suddenly intense as she herded Harry back, away from the pillar and towards the tracks. “Go now, boy, or you’ll miss your train!”

He looked behind his shoulder, there was a train....he hadn’t heard it approach. The doors were open and waiting, and for no good reason at all, he stepped inside. The strange little woman didn’t follow him on, she simply stood there watching him. that same incomprehensible smile on her face.

“Which path will you choose?” She asked again just before the doors closed, replacing his view of her with his own, pale reflection.

“What,” He said softly. Utterly confused. “The hell was that?” He looked down at his hand. He held a round silver locket, old and tarnish on flimsy silver chain. It was wrapped loosely in a piece of parchment covered in large, loopy writing. It said ‘Do not open until you are alone’.

The train kicked and began to move, leaving the station behind. Harry stuffed the locket and note in the pocket of his jeans, grabbing a rail to keep from flying down the aisle. The speakers overhead crackled before announcing that the train was now going express.

He groaned, tucking his head into the crook of his arm. So not only was he on an unknown train, he would be going to the end of the line with no stops.....Great. With a resigned sigh he went to find a plaque with a stop schedule to find out where he was going.

The train traveled all night. There was little to do but wait, so Harry propped up against one of the windows and tried to rest. There were very few passengers on besides him. Undoubtedly everyone else would have known that the train was running express and had gotten off if their destination wasn’t the last stop.

Though his eyes were closed he did not sleep. Sleep was not safe, his dreams were treacherous things that gave him no rest or peace. On the off chance that he managed to sleep through the night he would wake drained and aching, as if he’d spent the night playing a rather vigorous game of Quidditch instead of sleeping. So he closed his eyes but kept his mind from falling into the hazy siren song of sleep.

The end of the line was a small station by the sea, old and weathered, but even within the chipped plaster walls he could smell the ocean. It had been so long since he'd been to the beach. The Dursley's were never one to let him go on their nice vacations, he'd never had the opportunity to just admire the vast majesty of it all.

As Harry left the train he overheard a conductor say that the next train would depart in thirty minutes. Since he wasn't going anywhere for a while, and he had a pocket full of muggle money, and a hidden pouch of galleons just in case, he left the station and headed for the beach.

If he missed the next train he'd just take a later one. He could spend a few hours on the beach, catch his train, and make it back to the Dursley's long before Dumbledore said he'd be there. It would be like he was never gone. If he was really lucky no one will have noticed that he stepped out the night before and he could just have a pleasant, quiet, birthday alone.

It was easy enough to find his way to the beach from the station, even though the sun was just a promise on the horizon. He just followed the crashing of waves, walking further and further into the cool fresh breeze until his feet hit rocky sand.

Here and there a car full of groggy muggle families dotted the shore. Families that wanted to get an early start of what was sure to be a nice summer day. Staking out their territories before the crowds showed up. Harry avoided them as much as he could. Walking around them until he found a secluded stretch of sand.

When he was far enough away from the muggle families that no one could see him or would sneak up on him unannounced, he sat on the squishy dew damp sand to watch the sunrise.

He was sixteen years old now. Another year older....no wiser. He chuckled softly at his own joke. Would he have cards from his friends when he returned to the Dursley's? Probably not. It was likely Dumbledore would have told everyone he was going to get Harry and take him back to their world, so why bother with owls when they could just wait a day?

He didn't have anything to celebrate his birthday on the actual day. Except a crazy old lady and an impromptu trip to the beach. With a soft gasp he remembered the locket! He fished it out of his pocket hastily.

He unwrapped it from the parchment strip, tucking the paper away after he scanned the writing again. 'Do not open until you are alone.' Such an ominous statement. He had come into contact with many a nefarious object during his time in the wizarding world. Things that should never be touch at all, let alone opened to unleash potential terror.

But the locket was light in his hands, cheap silver on a chain so delicate he feared it would break under the locket's insubstantial weight. He cupped it in his hands, knees drawn to chest as he shivered in the chill air. He could feel nothing from it. Not like Riddle's diary, or Hermione's time turner, the rememberall, wands, the Marauder's Map. Every magical item felt of magic. Pulsed with it. Some stronger than others, certainly, but it was always there. If the locket was enchanted, or cursed, he should be able to tell.

In the pearly light of dawn he traced the thin script on the front of the locket. MG. that was it. Initials. Maybe the woman from the station? Maybe it was just something she'd found and in her delirium had handed it off to another stranger.

The clasp was difficult to pry open, resistant with age and disuse. Eventually it popped open with a little, groaning crack. Falling open on loose hinges to show two contrary pictures within.

The first was a man. Stationary and severe. He was a muggle, Harry was sure. With Black hair and dark eyes. Handsome, with high cheek bones and a chiseled jaw, strong nose and full lips that were set in a sly smirk. He couldn't see much of the man's clothing, the picture was mostly just his face. But from the faded sepia hue he figured it must be quite old...There was something almost familiar about this muggle. It tugged at a long abandoned memory.

Movement from the other side of the locket caught his eye, banishing that nagging tug. The other half of the locket was taken up by a witch with long, lanky black hair and dull grey eyes. Even in the low light she looked sallow and gaunt, though she smiled sweetly at him. Casting hesitant, blushing glances in the direction of the other picture. As though she knew he was right there and wanted to see him. Could she see him when the locket was closed? Even in the dark?

Harry snapped the locket closed, turning it in his hands to inspect it the silvery light. There was a large dent on the back, several scuffs and scraps along the rim, and grit pressed into the engraved letters, but other than that there was nothing to it. Just a lost memory of

some love struck witch? She didn't look anything like the lady who had shoved it into his hand. Maybe it was a friend of hers? Her sister? He was just about to open it again when several cracks split the air.

Harry was up in an instant, wand out and poised to strike. Years of being targeted had long since ingrained him with the speed and focus to fight back. The didn't stop the panic that raced through his veins at being found. How could the Death Eaters have known he was there?

Unless the woman.

Who was she really?

"Okay, now, son! Put your wand down. We're not here to hurt you." One of the cloaked figured said, though he couldn't tell which.

Harry looked around, frantic, at the wizards and witches around him. Each with their faces uncovered, wands out but not pointed to him. Several had their hands in the air as though to calm him down.

There was no way for him to know the faces of every Death Eater. Voldemort had been at large over a year now, he was bound to have followers Harry would have never seen before. So the fact that he didn't recognize any of the faces wasn't instantly reassuring.

A tall woman with curly, tawny colored hair and dark brown eyes broke away from the group, approaching him like he was a wild animal. "Hello there. my name is Sheryl Cane, we're with the ministry." Her voice was calm, though when she smiled it held something of exasperation in it. Like this was just a job she was ready to get over with. "You know you can't be using magic outside of school."

"And around the muggles." A gruff bearded wizard added, Cane nodded in agreement.

Harry gaped at them. "I didn't use magic!"

"Son, we got the call that a lot of magic was just used, right here." Another witch said, she was tall and slender with bright red hair and an angry cast to her blue eyes. "And our underage tracer went off."

"Everyone calm down." Cane ordered, those around her quieted as she focused back on Harry. "Now, what's your name, love? I'm sure we can get this all sorted out."

Was she serious? The ocean breeze lifted his hair up, sent it flying in every direction. He had neglected it for so long now that it almost reached his shoulders. For the most part it just curled however it wanted, not bothering him one bit. And now it danced in the wind, leaving his scar completely on display.

Cane's eyes searched his face, landed on his scar, and dropped back to his eyes without recognition. No one else in the group seemed to notice either, even though several had moved to stand next to her and in front of him once they deemed him not to be a threat.

He didn't like to brag, in fact the existence of his celebrity was often something he loathed, but never had he been somewhere in the wizarding world where no one knew who he was. There was always someone who knew him by sight, and if not that his scar was a dead give away. Literally every witch and wizard knew about that!

Cane didn't know him....none of the other's did as well. He took a deep breath, in and out. In and out. Something....was not right.

"My name is Harry....E-Evans." Hesitantly he added his mother's last name, if they really knew who he was someone would call him on that. Why wasn't anyone calling him on it?

"Well, Mr Evans, mind telling us what spell it was you just cast out here on a muggle beach?"

Harry gaped at her. "I told you I didn't use any magic!" Frustration broke through his worry for a moment. He might be surrounded by strangers, completely confused, but he would be damned if they kept thinking he was lying about that. He was pretty sure he was at his limit on breaking that no magic until you're an adult rule. "I was just here on the beach minding my own business when you lot popped up. Oh, wait, there was a locket." Was that it? The lady in the station had said to open when he was alone, was there some sort of magic in it he hadn't felt before? Something that....well he didn't know what it had done.

The locket was no longer in his hand, he must have dropped it in his haste to get his wand. He searched the sand around him, now rosy from the rising sun, it wasn't there. No glints of silver caught the light, nor was it trampled underfoot.

It was just gone.

"It was just here...." Harry said softly, dazed. "I swear I didn't caste

any spell..."

The bearded wizard whispered something in Cane's ear that had her nodding before she turned to Harry with an overly tender smile. "Let's head to the office, We can get this sorted out there. Maybe get you some breakfast. Would you like that?"

Before Harry could even form a reply, a large hand clamped down around his arm, pulling into a black vacuum as he was apparated away. They materialized in a small, cozily decorated room. There were several plush chairs and a small hearth with a merry fire going. There were no window, though the room was hardly oppressive for it, all soft pastel colors and warmth.

"This is one of the waiting rooms in the Improper Use of Magic Offices." He lead Harry to one of the chairs, watching him closely as he sat down. "My name is Basil Burke." Burke smiled at him exactly as Cane had, as though he feared Harry would run if spooked.

Harry nodded, casting a wary look around the room. Burke squeezed his shoulder and said in a soothing voice. "You aren't in trouble, now. We just need to get this all sorted out. Who are your guardians?"

Harry chewed on his lip worriedly, how did these people not know him? "Petunia and Vernon Dursley....they live at number four Privet Drive in Little Winging, Surrey."

Burke nodded. "I'll go look into contacting them now. Cane will be by in a bit, she'll want to run a test on your wand, just to make sure when the last time it was used was." He held up his hands in a placating manner before Harry could even his open his mouth to protest. "It's standard procedure for this sort of thing. Now, I'll be over in the office, right there, if you need me." Burke pointed to one of the few wooden doors around the room, waiting for Harry to nod again that he understood the simple direction, then he was off, dark robes billowing as the door closed behind him.

There was no clock in the room, and if this really was the ministry it meant to no windows at all. There was no way to tell what time it was now, or how much time had passed since Burke had entered his office, but the warmth from the hearth had seeped in through his sweater, stilling his chills if not completely warming him, by when Burke returned.

He held a white porcelain cup in one hand and what looked like a magazine in the other as he approached, that overly tender smile back

in place. "Thought you could do with a cup of tea. And got this for you. It's my son's, he's about your age. Fourteen?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm sixteen."

"Oh!" Burke appraised him again, a flicker of emotion Harry could decipher crossed his face before settling in that placid smile again. Shrugging, he handed Harry what turned out to be a muggle comic book with muscled man on the cover that appeared to shooting sparks from his hands. "You're muggle born, right? Figured you'd like that."

"Er...no. My parents weren't muggles." He quirked an eyebrow at Burke's confused frown. "But my aunt and uncle are."

"You're guardians?" Harry nodded. "That makes sense, then." He mutter to himself, then he was back to his cheerful demeanor. "Cane will be here soon. Drink your tea, Harry, and try to relax."

Harry eyed the steaming cup as Burke disappeared into his office once more. It smelled like normal tea when he took it in his still cold hands. That didn't mean he wasn't wary of it. Something strange was going on and he didn't know if he should trust these people or not.

He still hadn't taken a sip of the tea, choosing to hold it in his hands for warmth instead, when another door opened and Cane swept into the room. Without the wind blowing her hair around it framed her face in delicate curls, making her look younger than he had originally thought her to be.

"Hello, Harry," Cane said as she entered, she held a covered tray in her hands that she sat before him on the table. "I believe I promised you breakfast." She lifted the lid, revealing a large plate of eggs, toast, and sausages. There were little pats of butter and tiny crock of jam. It looked amazing.

Even though he was starving....what had he even eaten the day before? Had he eaten the day before? He suddenly couldn't remember when the last time had crept down the stairs to raid the pantry had been. But his wariness increased, he couldn't make himself eat just yet.

Harry had heard Mrs Weasley yell about how Arthur needed to eat a good, healthy breakfast at home. Appalled by the sugary confections that plagued the halls of the Ministry. This food, Cane hadn't just scrounged it up from around the department.

“It’s from the cafe across the street. I promise it’s safe.” Cane was giving him thoughtful, almost sad, look. She crouched down at the side of his chair, putting them almost face to face. “I need to check your wand now, Harry. I’ll do it here so you can see. Try and eat something, okay?”

He didn’t really have much of choice, so he set his tea down, fished his wand out from his jeans and handed it over. He tried to keep an eye on it as she worked, but his eyes kept going back to the food. It didn’t look like there was anything wrong with the it, that he could tell. And after a tentative nibble of some toast, he found himself quickly scarfing the rest down.

Cane did whatever it was she needed to do to his wand. Shaking her head in confusion as she handed it back to him. “Well, you were right, it hasn’t been used today. And the last spell wouldn’t have accounted for what we sensed today.” She rose back up with a soft groan. “Finish your meal, and we’ll get a hold of your relatives and send you home.”

“Okay.” Harry said around a mouth full of eggs, he was feeling much better now that he knew they weren’t going to try any funny stuff with him. It was probably the best encounter he’d ever had with the Ministry if he was being honest. No one trying to pin things on him that hadn’t done, or using him to make some sort of point or demonstration of their powers.

They just gave him breakfast and a comic, and were going to send him on his way.

He didn’t noticed when Cane left the room, but by the time his plate was clean he was alone. He settled back in the plush chair, enjoying the tingling warmth that the food and tea lent him, and decided he might as well pass the time with Burke’s son’s comic.

He scanned the cover, taking in the heavily lined details of lightening and what was probably a visual representation of the character having super powers in the form of white hazy lines. Hardly paying attention to the name and issue number, he was just about to turn to the first page when the small printed date at the bottom caught his eye.

1944

Harry turned the comic over in his hands curiously. It looked good for being so old...odd though that Burke’s son would let such a collector’s item out of his sight. Just leaving it at his father’s office. With a shrug, Harry opened the book and began to read.

Burke's door opened again and he and Cane came over to him, twin looks of confusion and worry on their faces.

"Harry...." Cane started, glancing over at Burke before she continued. "Harry, we're having trouble getting a hold of your family. Is there anywhere else they might be?"

He closed the comic, instantly attentive. He wasn't worried, not exactly. It wouldn't be the first time the Dursley's just up and left him with no warning. It wouldn't even be the first time they had abandoned him on his birthday. "Not that I know of....sometimes they leave without saying anything though." Burke and Cane shared another look, Harry hurried up and tried to smooth it over. "You really don't need to contact them. I can get home on my own."

He made to sit the comic on the table and stand up, but Cane was once again crouched in front of him, a hand on his shoulder to keep him seated. "We just want to talk to them. It's dangerous for you to be wandering around alone. With the wars and everything."

Harry nodded, but...wars? There was just Voldemort. Right?

"Is there anyone else who we can talk to? Someone who can come get you." She asked softly.

"There's Professor Dumbledore." He said, hesitant. He hadn't wanted to get him involved, still hoping he'd be able to get home before Dumbledore could find out that he had disobeyed him about leaving.

Cane looked instantly relieve. "I'll send him an owl right away. We'll get this sorted out Harry. Don't worry."

He wasn't worried. Maybe a little concerned. More annoyed than anything. He had gotten himself to the ocean, accidental though it may have been. He could get himself back home no problem. But he nodded, watching as she hurried from the room once more.

Burke came up him again, even though he smiled there was a tension around his eyes that hadn't been there before, highlighting dark, tired circles. "You like Quidditch, Harry?"

"Yes." he said dubiously

Burke pulled a paper from his robes, the pages already pulled back to show an article on a resent Quidditch match. "It might be some time before we can get a hold of Albus, so I wanted to give you something

else to do. Do you need anything else?"

"No, I'm find. Thank you." Harry took the paper, held it in numb hands as Burke nodded and walked off after telling Harry yet again to just let him know when he needed anything.

For several long minutes he just sat there, fingers playing back and forth across the smooth newsprint. They couldn't find the Dursleys....they didn't know who he was.....the comic.

Swallowing dryly Harry closed the paper, turning it until the front page was showing and upright. It fell through his fingers when he read date, hitting the floor with a resounding crack that filled the silent room

Daily Prophet, 31 July, 1944

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Ablus had been in his office, penning yet another letter that would surely go unread, when he'd received the Ministry's owl. He was actually happy about this distraction. A child needed him and that, at least, was something he could handle.

He took the floo to the Ministry Atrium, not bothering to stop and pen a reply first. Dusting excess powder from the sleeves of his bright magenta robes, he made straight for the lifts and to the second floor.

It felt like ages since he'd left his office, since he'd walked in the sun, since he'd stretched his aching legs. Even a stroll through the Ministry felt like a treat. He found himself humming softly in the lift, smiling at the all the tiny envelopes as they fluttered overhead, several zoomed out the doors as soon as they opened. Albus following them at a more relaxed pace.

A group of black clad Ministry workers stood in the hall, whispered frantic words to each other, fidgeting as they looked to a door at the end of the hall. Sheryl Cane broke away from the group when she spotted him, giving him a wane, but kind smile.

"Albus, I can't tell you what a relief it is to see you." She clasped his hands warmly, squeezing them tight.

“Something wrong?” The letter said he needed to confirm the identity of a student. An odd request, yes, but one that should have been simple enough.

“I’m not sure....” She sighed, a great release of air that seemed to deflate her before his eyes. “I just don’t know. He says his name is Harry Evans, but there’s no child listed on the Hogwarts registry with that name. No Harry at all. Several Harolds and a few Harrisons, but no plan Harry. No one named Evans either, as far as I can see.”

“That is odd.” Albus gave a thoughtful nod. “The name is not familiar to me. He said he knew me personally?”

“Yes,” Her voice was desperate, she clutched his arm as she led him to the door. “Not just that but the names and address he gave us for his family also appear to be wrong. Not only is there no magical person listed as living in the area, when we sent someone to look in on the house it turned out an elderly muggle woman lived there alone, not the aunt and uncle he claimed to live with.”

Curiouser and curiouser. “What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know, Ablus. But...that’s no all.” She stopped before the door, her voice low so as not to carry, the usual healthy glow of her skin tinged slightly green. “He’s....unwell.”

“How so?”

She ran a hand through her hair, wincing slightly when a curl caught on her ring. “You know I don’t do kids, Ablus. I’m not good with them. But I just...I can’t handle abuse cases above all.”

He frowned down at her. “That’s what this is then?”

“I don’t know, he won’t talk to us. After we said we’d contact you he’s been completely unresponsive.”

“I’ll do what I can.” He assured her. Turning to the door he made sure to put on his best, kindest smile. Eye’s twinkling, he opened the door.

The boy was sitting in one of the room’s large chairs, placed so that he could look into the fire. The day, what he had gleaned from the window that morning, was bright and sunny. A warm breeze blowing in what had otherwise been a dreary summer. But this boy was shrouded in a large muggle sweater, arms wrapped around his chest tightly as though to keep everything, not just his phantom chill away.

He couldn't see much of the boy, swallowed into the chair as he was. Just his hands, small and bony where they clutched his elbows and the outline of thin legs through his jeans. Then he turned his head, probably sensing eyes on him. It took everything in Albus to not gasp, to not physically flinch.

Times were hard. No one was immune to the deprivation the wars were causing. But he couldn't imagine what this boy had gone through to look as he did. His face was not just gaunt, it was almost skeletal. Dark circles marred what was otherwise smooth pale skin, so white he feared that it had been sometime since the boy had seen any sun at all.

But it was his eyes, such a lovely, shocking green, that made Albus' heart stop in his chest. They were large, haunted eyes. He'd seen those who had suffered great loss before. In his students, in my friends in family. In the mirror. Grief always made itself known in one way or another. And he was looking into the eyes of a child who had seen far more than his fair share.

He knew now why Sheryl had been so distraught. She wasn't equipped to help out in this way. But he was.

He approached the boy slowly, keeping his warm smile on his face. "Hello, Harry, was it?"

He nodded, his throat visibly working, his long neck just as thin as the rest of him.

"Would you like to tell me what's going on?" Albus asked softly, sitting himself in the chair across from Harry's.

Harry turned back to the fire, worrying his lip for a time before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a folded piece of parchment. He read it quickly, glancing up at Albus with his large luminous eyes once he was finished. Harry held out a small, shaking arm to him, Albus had enough time to notice a few faded scars on his fingers before he realized that Harry was trying to offer him the note.

He took it with steady hands, "Thank you." He said brightly, smoothing it out, he began to read.

Dear Harry,

If it is convenient to you, I shall call at number four Privet drive this coming

Wednesday at eleven o'clock. There are some matters I wish to discuss with both you and your relatives, including Sirius' estate and where it would be best for you to spend the remainder of summer break.

If it is agreeable to you, I should also be glad of your assistance with a matter to which I hope to attend once we leave your aunt's home. It should not take long.

I do hope this missive finds you well. And remember to stay within the boundary of Privet Drive until I come for you on your birthday. Please send your reply back with this owl, I hope to see you Wednesday.

I am, yours most sincerely  
Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

He blinked at the parchment for several seconds before reading it once again. He placed the missive on his lap so Harry wouldn't see it shake. He'd written that....it wasn't just his name that proved it. That was his hand writing, it was written in a tone that he knew as his own.

He hadn't written this.

Harry was staring into the fire, absently picking at a thread on the over large sleeve of his sweater. After a while he turned to meet Albus' eyes. Again he found them too bright, piercing and somehow accusing. Harry worried his lip again before clearing his throat to speak. "I...left my aunt's house. Just for a while. I meant to go back before my birthday actually arrived."

He trailed off mumbling something about wards and how he, Albus, had said it was safe. Albus nodded encouragingly to him, trying to get him to keep talking.

"I went to the Underground, just to watch the people and be alone. But this strange woman came up to me talking about fate and changing fate. I thought she was crazy. Then she shoved a locket at me and pushed me on a train....When the train stopped it was morning and I was at the ocean, so I just decided to spend some time there."

Harry fidgeted a little, his exhaustion clear though he made no complaint, nor did he falter in the telling of his story. "I went to a

secluded part of the beach to watch the sunrise....I took out the locket she handed me, there was nothing about it really. It was just old. I opened it and then all these Ministry workers showed up. And....”

“And?” Albus prompted, though he already suspected what Harry would say.

Harry’s gaze dropped to a newspaper that was sitting on the small table between them. “And....nothing is quite right. No one knows me here and....and the date, it’s wrong.”

“How so?” Albus’ voice was but a whisper, he leaned forward, intent on hearing Harry’s every soft spoken word. “How is it different? How is it wrong?”

“If the paper is correct, if that’s today.” He looked to Albus who nodded, it was in fact that day’s paper. “Then I’m....somehow I traveled more than fifty years in the past.”

It took an eternity for Albus to process that. Or so it felt. Fifty years in the past? Fifty years in the future....he looked down at the paper still on his lap, at a letter he had yet to write. He gave a curt nod. “Do you still have this locket?”

Harry shook his head, sighing softly. “When they all showed up I was so startled I dropped it in the sand, but, when I looked for it, it was gone.”

“It would certainly be easier to figure out what had happened if we could examine the locket, as I’m rather sure it’s what caused this.”

“I think so too.” Harry’s voice was thoughtful, low. “It didn’t feel like anything when I held it though. I couldn’t sense any magic from it. It was just an old beaten up locket with a muggle photo of a man and magic photo of a woman...that’s it.”

Dumbledore ran a hand through his long auburn beard, if there were a few more grey hairs in it than there were a year ago, well, he had earned them twice over by now. “We’ll figure this out Harry. Don’t you worry.” He folded up the letter and handed it back, making sure that his face only showed calm acceptance. “But you can’t stay here...I’ll set up accommodations for you. You can’t stay at Hogwarts I’m afraid, but we’ll find you a place all the same until school starts.”

Harry nodded, taking the letter back, clutching it in his thin hands. “Thank you, Professor.”

“You’ll be in the sixth year, they tell me.” Harry nodded. “We’ll then there’s nothing for you to do but get some rest. I’ll make sure you’re somewhere safe.” The front page of the paper gave the latest news on both the muggle and wizarding world’s wars. Albus gave a little gasp of understanding. If Harry had seen that it would account for some of his unease.

“Listen,” Albus leaned forward, reaching out to lay a gentle hand on Harry’s arm for comfort. Halfway there he thought better of it, something in the way Harry sat, so still, so closed off in his own little bubble, told him it was better to not make contact. In the last moment he placed his hand on the paper instead. “I don’t want you to worry about any of this. The wars. You’ll be perfectly safe here, and nothing can get past the wards in Hogwarts. You can just focus on school.”

Harry laughed, light and derisive.

“Is everything alright, Harry?”

He met Albus’ eye for the first time straight on. “It’s just funny, sir. You telling me that.”

Albus didn’t stay long after that. Too unsettled. It wasn’t the first time meeting a potential student had sent a shiver of cold dread down his spine. Mostly because it meant he would have some unpleasant dealings with the muggles who had raised them. As Deputy Headmaster it was his job to bring the muggle born children into the fold. In his time he’d dealt with more than his fair share of bigoted, hateful guardians that always left him grateful that he could be there for those children.

This was different.

There was something in the way Harry had said ‘you’, how it was emphasized. He hadn’t said, it was odd for someone to say that him, or just that it was a funny thing to say. It had been darkly humorous to him that Albus would say such a thing to him. In fifty years he was going to have such a relationship with this boy that Harry would find it so counter that Albus would want him to just be a kid and not worry about the wars.

There were so many questions he couldn’t ask. Time was finicky thing. It was probably not for the best that Harry was running around so displaced from his own time, but Albus couldn’t find it in him to put anymore pressure and worry on those small shoulders.



Sheryl was waiting for him when he exited the room, his melancholy mood must have shown on his face for she tried to give him a smile full of false cheer. “So, do you know him.”

Ablus nodded. He had already gone over what Harry needed to tell people when they asked about him. Now was his time to start it off. “Harry’s parent’s died in the war, he was being raised and schooled at home by his godfather until his recent passing. He’ll be going to Hogwarts in the fall.” It was close enough to what little Harry had shared with him. Generalities, no specifics.

“What about the address in Surrey?”

He shook his head as he stepped away, towards the lifts. “Forget about that. It was a mistake. I’ll have his accommodations set up soon, be waiting for my owl with instructions. Make sure he has everything he’ll need, clothes. Robes for school and daily wear.” It wasn’t safe for him to dress like a muggle when walking around the wizarding community. That was yet something else that seemed to have changed between and now and Harry’s time. “Make sure he gets everything he’ll need for school as well.”

“Of course, Ablus.” Sheryl said, trailing behind him. “Take it out of the school fund?”

“No.” He stopped in his tracks, running a nervous hand through his long, wavy hair. “No....I’ll cover everything. I’ll send a letter to Gringotts.” Maybe it was silly, but he felt responsible for Harry. He had plenty of money now, he’d never use it all on his own....and he couldn’t shake the feeling that he owed it to Harry in some way.

“...Okay...” Sheryl didn’t sound as sure, but she made a little note in the pocket book she kept in her robe.

With that taken care of he left her in the hall and got in the lift. Gone was the leisure pace of before. He no longer wanted to stretch his legs, to smell the roses, to ignore his duties in favor of any little distraction.

When he reached the Atrium, Albus fled.

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For a time after the door had closed, after Dumbledore had left, Harry sat and stared at where he had been.

He had looked so different. So young. Though more haggard than Harry remembered from before. When he was eleven and just beginning his journey at Hogwarts, Dumbledore had seemed so light, effervescent. Full of life. Sometimes he had thought that a gentle breeze would just come and swoop him away, he'd never known someone to exude so much cheer.

After Voldemort's return he had begun to change, but who wouldn't with so much to worry about. He was leading a war....Harry knew how he felt. How draining and heartbreaking that was.

Maybe he had just as big a hand in the wars going on now as he would in fifty years?

He tried for a while to remember what those wars were...World War II, the Nazis and well there were bombings and it wasn't a good time. But he knew they didn't win, and wasn't that comforting? He smiled softly to himself before breaking out in giddy laughter.

It didn't matter what the wars were, he knew they didn't win. Who ever was terrorizing the wizarding world and muggle world alike. They didn't win! Really he had no reason to worry about them at all! Not them! Not Voldemort either! He couldn't touch Harry from the future.

He stood from the chair, walking over to the fire, Dumbledore's letter to him held loosely in hand. The man himself had given him another order....to let go....to not worry....to relax. Voldemort's war was still going on. Somewhere, but not here.

There was a place where Harry was meant to face him. Kill him or be killed himself.

Somewhere, but not here.

The parchment caught fire easily, it burned low. Consuming words he never wanted to read again. When he could keep it in his hands no longer he tossed it, careless, into the fire.

He laughed again, it was so unbelievable. It probably wouldn't last.

But for however long he was stuck here, tucked away, anonymous in the past.

Harry was finally free.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 2

They put him up at the Leaky Cauldron.

Less than an hour after Dumbledore left Cane came back, reading from a little book she'd pulled from her pocket. Without looking up she informed him that he would be taken to the Leaky Cauldron where a room had already been provided for him until the first of September. His meals, room, and even all the clothes and books he'd need for school would be taken care of, he assumed from a fund the school had for orphans and those who's families couldn't afford everything that was needed.

He had no small amount of gold on him as it was. The pouch he used had been enchanted by Hermione a few years ago, it could hold a small fortune and weighed nothing. He also had a wad of muggle cash he could change back to wizarding money once he reach Diagon Alley. It was all the money he had now, his overflowing vault now fifty years out of reach. He should save as much as he could, which meant dealing with the second hand books and clothing he was sure would be the only stores he'd get to spend school money at.

Even though Cane had make it seem like everything was ready for him to leave, it was almost another hour before anyone came to collect him. When the door open again it was Burke, carrying a bundle of black cloth. He fixed Harry with a smile before shaking it out to reveal a set of robes.

"These are my son's, but I think they should fit." At Harry's blank look he elaborated. "You can't walk through Diagon Ally in muggle clothes."

"Why....not?" Harry began asking before he remember that this was not his time.

Burke sighed, dropping down in the chair next to him "I know you've been traveling with your family and godfather, you've needed to blend

in with the muggles to do that, right?" Harry nodded tentatively...That fit his cover well enough. "Since Grindelwald's war, his anti muggle initiative, it's just easier to wear the robes in wizarding spaces."

Harry glanced back at the paper, he hadn't read it but the headline and pictures on the front were nothing to take lightly. The war never reached Hogwarts, it never even reached Diagon Alley. He knew that it would progress as it should, for Harry was not getting involved, so his being there shouldn't matter. History may have assured him of these facts, but the small things. How the wars effected simple everyday life, hadn't been quite so thoroughly recorded.

He took the robes from Burke and shrugged them on. He would blend in and not complain. The robes fit surprisingly well, considering they belonged to someone two years his junior. He buttoned them up carefully, making sure nothing of his muggle clothes could be seen under them.

Burke gave him a curt nod and motioned for him to come stand by the fire. From inside his robes Burke pulled out a small jar of shimmery green powder, pulled the stopper and tossed a healthy pinch into the fireplace. As the flames roared up, a vicious sizzling green, Burke turned to him with a kind smile.

"Cane is waiting for you. she has everything all settled. She'll show you around where you'll be staying for the next month until school starts." He patted Harry's back quickly then yelled 'The Leaky Cauldron' into the green flames, wished Harry good luck and stepped away.

several fireplaces zipped passed his eyes as soon as he stepped into the flames, it was a dizzying but fast trip and soon he was spilling out into the familiar lobby of the Leaky Cauldron.

Cane was there, as Burke said she would be. She grabbed him as he fell out of the hearth, steadied him, and let him go quickly. Dusting green powder and soot from his robes and hair, he took a look around, gathering his bearings. Though it was hardly noon, the Cauldron was already quite lively. Most of the patrons were eating lunch, though more than a few of them were already nursing tankards and tumblers. He smiled as he took it all in.

Nothing had changed.

Cane led him to the counter. Hardly anyone took notice of them as they wove their way through the small tables. It was quite liberating,

actually. To be out in public and not have people stare. No one gave him more than a passing look! He smiled softly as they reached the counter, and it only grew when Cane called for Tom. Tom! He was still here? Or rather, he was already here...it was going to be hard keeping that in order.

Harry's small smile slipped, his mouth falling open as Tom bustled in through a back door, arms laden with a tray of drinks and bowls of stew. It was Tom alright. Those kind brown eyes and bright smile could belong to no one else. But this Tom was much, much younger, Harry would be surprised if he were any older than 30. His cheeks were round and rosy, his frame stocky and his arms strong, flexing through the sleeves of his rolled up shirt. He even had hair! And lots of it. All bushy and straw blond.

Harry quickly pulled himself together. It wouldn't do for him to be gaping at a stranger like an idiot. Like Harry had never seen a bartender before. Tom didn't know him. No one knew he knew Tom either. He smoothed out his features and breathed deep. He just had to hold it together and he could keep his cover intact.

"Tom," Cane began once he was near. "This is Harry Evans, the one I told you about."

Tom placed the tray on the counter, he gave Harry a nod and a bright smile. "Pleasure to meet you, Harry! If you need anything just let me know, we'll get you set up right away." He shook Harry's hand with such force he feared his arm would be yanked out of socket. When Tom let go he took up the tray once more and raced away towards his waiting patrons without another word.

"Come on, I've already got your room." Cane said, leading him to the stairwell. Harry followed without a word, taking in the subtle differences from this world and his own.

Really nothing had changed much. Maybe a few things were different. He couldn't recall paying too much attention to the drapes, and if there were always a deep red velvet? Or to whether or not there had been a delicate floral pattern to the wallpaper in his time. Too much time had passed since he last walked these halls, too much had happened since then. But when Cane opened one of the few doors on the second floor and ushered him inside, suddenly he was thirteen again. Blessedly on his own and away from the Dursley's for the first time.

The room was just as cozy and large as he recalled from before, though he doubted it was the same room. A large four poster bed took up most of the room, crimson curtains parted to display a myriad of pillows and fluffy looking blankets in tones of browns and red that brought out splashes of the same colors throughout the room. The drapes were the same thick crimson ones same as were in the hall, a plush mosaic rug took up most of the floor, and even the over stuffed chair by the hearth was shocking red.

It put him at ease more than the common room of the Leaky Cauldron and Tom's smiling face ever could. This was the homey comfort he had come to count on from the wizarding world. Tension from his all too exciting day began to fade, his worry ebbed. Leaving his limbs heavy as his eyes began to sag closed.

Cane cleared her throat behind him. "I have a room down the hall, I'll have to go into the Ministry for most of the week, but I'll be here in the mornings and back in time for dinner." She raised her hands to placate him at his sullen look. "I'm not here to get in your hair, you're old enough to look after yourself mostly. But if you need me, I'll be here."

"Okay." Harry nodded. No matter what she said he was pretty sure she had been assigned by the Ministry to be his babysitter until September first. Luckily he knew his way around Diagon Alley and felt more than confident he could give her the slip when he wanted some time alone.

"You get settled and let me know when you're ready to go shopping. Doesn't have to be today, but we do need to get you some robes to wear until school starts." Harry nodded and when it became clear he didn't intend to answer verbally Cane nodded back, a tad nervously. "I'll be at the bar if you need me."

When she was gone, the door shut firmly behind her, Harry let out a great sigh of relief. He hadn't properly rested in days and it was beginning to wear on him. Now that things had settled enough that he didn't readily fear for his life, it might be fifty years in the past but if the Leaky Cauldron had been safe enough for him when a supposed murderer was out for his blood then it was safe now too.

Not that he had been in real danger then, but he was in even less trouble now. In fact he was probably safer now than he had ever been in his life.

He shook his head ruefully. Funny, how that thought was just sad and not reassuring.

He shucked off Burke's borrowed robes as he approached the bed. They were the only things he had to wear out of this room, he didn't want them to get mussed up, and he would rather not hand a rumpled mess over when he returned them. Kicking off his shoes, suddenly thankful to Hermione for pushing him to get the black leather slip ons, more for their ease of removal and not necessarily for their aesthetic appeal, he crawled onto the giant bed and promptly burrowed into the many pillows. He rolled himself in one of the blankets, belatedly realizing that he was still wearing his glasses.

A smile curved his lips as he wiggled enough to reach his wand. He was in a wizarding establishment, there would be no way for anyone in the Ministry to know that he was the one doing magic. And even if someone did see, Harry Evans didn't have a record. He would just get a stern reminder to not do magic outside of school.

Once his glasses were safely on the night stand and his wand tucked under his pillow, he laid back into the cushions with content sigh, yawing deeply. Sleep, as always, didn't come willingly. He stared at the ceiling for a while, listening to the soft noise of the busy street and the gentle murmurs of conversation from the room below.

Now that his mind was settled, it wandered. Bringing up all the things he had pushed aside before in the panic of the moment.

He was alone, in the past. Before he'd always had someone when he had gotten into a scrape. At least to start. He'd never gone in blindly and without back up before....not that he had planned this....not that things ever turned out exactly well when he did have back up and some form of a plan.

He sighed, rolling around to bury his face in the pillows. What would Ron and Hermione do when they found out his was gone? What about Dumbledore!? He was going to come knocking at Privet Drive in a few hours, what would he do when he found that Harry wasn't there?

The Dursley's, he knew already, wouldn't give a damn. They would be happy to be finished with him and tell Dumbledore to shove off.

Voldemort would be happy. The object of his hatred just up and disappearing from the face of the earth! Though that also meant there was no Chosen One there to thwart him now....maybe someone else would step up and do the job. Harry giggled to himself, in Fifty years

he would sixty six. Sixty six year old Harry could probably kick Voldemort's butt a lot better than sixteen year old Harry could.

His smile grew as he realized he could see Ron and Hermione again. How would they react if a sixty year old Harry showed up at their door? Maybe he was doing that even now! He laughed softly as the scenarios played through his mind, finding joy in his silly musings until sleep finally claimed him.

For once his dreams were peaceful, muzzy things.

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Tom strolled through the crowds of Diagon Alley like a king. No. Like the Lord that he was. People stepped out of his way as he passed, nodding to him and smiling bright. And like any good lord Tom was kind to his people. He greeted them with kind words and a gentle, charming smile.

It was the same every time he ran one of these errands for Mr Borgin. Once he stepped out of the comforting gloom of the trinket shop he had to become Tom Riddle, a sweet, mild tempered teen who everyone loved. He was always careful to be warm to others, to put his best foot forward, as it were.

So, as soon as his feet hit the sidewalk he was sure to always be respectful, always be polite, and above all. He was always Cheerful. Not that he was disrespectful or surly while he manned the shop. It was just that, for the most part, he worked the dark storefront on his own. Able to do his own research, safely able to be himself. Until the bell chimed and he was once more forced to leave Lord Voldemort behind the counter.

The day was bright, one of the rare sunny days in that rather dreary summer. Not that he lamented that fact. He had never understood what everyone saw in the sun anyway. Why they all flocked out to 'bask' in its rays. He did so too, for show and only when he had to in order to keep up appearances. Otherwise he preferred being inside, with his books and any interesting artifacts that made their way into his clutches.

It was a feeling that only progressed after the ritual. He cared even

less to be among the throngs of the dirty populous. He was more now than they ever could be. So much more!

Yes, more. Not less. Never less. The world might have lost a bit of its golden light. A fact he had accept in the days after the ritual. Every time he held his diary, his horcrux, colors were a little more vibrant, the light just a touch brighter. It hadn't taken him long to realized what had changed.

Why it changed.

In a way that was something of a blessing. It made trekking through Diagon Alley, with its dazzling white cobbled streets and the constant haze of magic that filled the air, so much easier. And it was with no small measure of delight that he had discovered this change actually improved his night vision. He found himself able to read long into the night without the need of lighting a candle. He could walk out on the night of a new moon and see for what felt like miles. How could an improvement be seen as less?

And if his chest still ached from time to time it was nothing that finding his diary and holding it for a minute or two couldn't cure. It was just a small inconvenience. A challenge to be met and won.

One didn't simply back down when things got a little rough. Adaptation was the key to survival. Tom had learned that so long ago he could no longer place exactly when the lesson had hit home. No one was going to hold his hand, the world didn't just hand you what you wanted. All life did was throw obsticals at you, and you could either roll over and let your dreams pass you by or you could fight your way around the hardships, through them, and take what was yours.

He floated along the cobbled road, for all appearances brimming with cheer. He made small talk with a coffee vendor, and the little witch who sold charms on the corner. The owner of the bookstore came out as he passed to tell Tom he'd just reviewed a shipment of that ancient runes book Tom had asked about last week.

Just another day.

He made his way to the stretch of wall that would lead to the Leaky Cauldron, tapped out the correct sequence to open the archway and swept inside. He put his wand back into robes, smirking when no one could see him. He was seventeen now, no one could say anything against his magic use outside of school. Not that they really had

before. Tom was nothing if not careful. But there was just something very soothing in being able to pull one's wand out without having every adult wizard breathing down your neck.

The common room of the Leaky Cauldron was just as it had been when Tom had first seen it seven years ago. A light fog of smoke filled the hair with a blue, sweet smelling haze. The soft chatter of patrons. The welcoming warmth of the fire that bespoke the promise of food and comfort.

It was a very pleasant place, the first magical establishment that he and many others ever saw after receiving their letters. There was just one thing he didn't like about it.

"Tom!"

Tom ground his teeth, just managing to keep his smile from slipping in a grimace. The one thing He hated about the Leaky Cauldron, about the wizarding world in general.

"Good morning, Tom." He said far more calmly than the bartender before him had. He hated the man, hated that he shared a name with such a plain, common, man. In fact, Tom had learned that his name was rather popular in the wizarding world.

It was the biggest reason for the creation of his true name so many years ago.

Tom the bartender, who refused to give people his surname and had disregarded Tom's when he had introduced himself seven years ago because "They were name mates!", smiled across the worn bar. Meaty hands on his hip, his dull straw hair a mess of flyways and tangles.

As if it wasn't bad enough that they had to share a name, this Tom couldn't even be bothered to properly groom himself.

But he said none of that, he smile his bright smile and held up the parchment slip he always had on his visits here. "Mr Borgin needs a few things from the other side." Tom the barkeep knew this, as Tom came in once a month with similar requests. The Leaky Cauldron was the gateway between the worlds, and the workers were more than used to running errands in the muggle realm for rest of Diagon Alley.

Tom the barkeep took the slip, looked it over briefly, and gave Tom a dopey smile before assured he'd have everything ready to be picked up in the morning. He nodded and turned to leave, almost running

into a dark haired child who had been trying to leave toward the Alley before his mother had called him over for breakfast.

For the moment the world shifted, faded into warmth, blinding relief. Unconsciously Tom massaged his chest, it had jolted with something. Not quite painful, just an odd pressure. Annoyance flashed through him for just a moment. But by the time he had composed himself enough the boy was already seated at the table, poking angrily at his food.

He took a deep, centering breath. People really needed to watch their children more closely, but it wasn't the first time uppity wizarding children had raced out in his path. Oblivious that some weren't as lucky as them. Growing up in a world where they were understood. Not having to fight for everything in life.

He shook it off, put aside any...jealousy, he might have felt about being denied such a life. Things in the wizarding world needed to change.

But it would have to wait.

Just a few years more.

With a long sigh Tom headed back to the Alley. He still had a shipment from Egypt to sift through and Mr Black would be coming by for that cursed money clip later that afternoon.

He tapped out the right pattern to open the wall, put on his most charming smile, and stepped out into the crowded streets of Diagon Alley.

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Any hopes that Cane would keep her word to stay out of his hair were dashed as Harry tried to make his way to Diagon Alley that first morning. She was already waiting for him in the common room, bright eyed and ready for the day. She called to him to sit and have a decent breakfast.

He was only just able to curb the annoyance that surged through his chest as he stalked over to her. Accidentally bumping into a tall dark

haired man on his way, who didn't even acknowledge Harry's hurried apology as he scowled, rubbing his chest in anger.

It was honestly kinda nice to be ignored for once. He was take real aggravation over being fawned over any day.

He went to the table, took up a fork, and poked a bit at the meal. He had woken up just long enough the day before to have a nice dinner, stew and fresh bread, with Cane before heading back to bed. It wasn't much, and she had narrowed her eyes when he'd left the bowl half full and several large chunks of crust on his plate. But it was more than he'd eaten all summer. Even now he was still rather full from it.

Cane took a sip of her coffee as she watched Harry roll a greasy sausage around on his plate, her mouth pressed into a thin line when it appeared he had no intention of actually eating the thing. "I have the funds for you clothes and school supplies. Though we should hold off getting you books until we know what classes you'll be taking."

Harry nodded as she spoke, giving up on being able to stomach the sausage he instead too up a slice of toast, slathering some jam and butter on it before taking a small bite.

"Someone from the Ministry should be by later today to administer a placement exam for you." At Harry's worried look, his mouth too full of toast to say anything, she said. "Don't worry. It'll just let them know what you already know. Help you find the right classes to take, that sort of thing. You aren't actually being tested for anything specifically."

Well he didn't believe that....but it did make sense. Oh god....he was going to be put back in first year potions, he just knew it! The toast went down painfully when he swallowed, his throat suddenly very dry.

Cane didn't seem to notice.

She stretched her arms above her head as she rose, evidently taking Harry's subtle pushing of the plate for the end of his breakfast. Which it was. "So we'll go get you those robes, a few for school and a few for everyday. It shouldn't take long and then we can be back in time for that placement exam."

Harry followed her through the pub to the entrance of the alley like he didn't know the way. Actually he probably shouldn't know the way, as far as she knew he'd never been there before. It was better

that he follow along and act like this was all shiny and new to him. Hard as that was going to be.

Or so he thought, for exactly as long as it took him to step through the archway onto Diagon Alley. Then the ruse seemed so much easier.

It was different alright. There were a few stores with the same name, selling the same old things. Flourish and Blotts was still there, as was Gringotts, of course. A few shops that Harry had never been in before were still there, one selling second hand magical items, and one that sold charmed items, neither of which had ever interested him enough to go into before. He was probably happiest to see that Fortescue's Ice Cream Shop was right where he knew it to be.

Other things were missing, though that was to be expected. There was a broom shop, but it wasn't the Quiddich supply store he was used to. This one looked far more....fictional, might be the word. Though where was a broom in one of the windows that caught his eye, a display under it read :Comet 550: and proclaimed it to be the fastest racing broom around.

Harry's lips twitched as he read the display. He was pretty sure there some Comet 550s in a shed on the Quiddich pitch back at Hogwarts in his time. Pushed way back in a dark corner, collecting dust and cobwebs. Ostensibly they were there as back up in case someone needed to use them. Though the only Harry had ever seen someone even touch them was when Fred and George had challenged each other to duel and used two of the ancient brooms as makeshift swords.

But here, now, in 1945, without any of their charms faded, in pristine condition. Well, they wouldn't beat his Firebolt, but he would be willing to give it try.

Thinking of his broom sent a pang of longing through him. It was easy enough to think of this as a sort of vacation, until he remembered just how much he'd actually left behind, never to see again.

Cane, misreading his evident malaise, chuckled softly as she doubled back to see what had held him up. "You'll have plenty of time to ogle over brooms tomorrow, kiddo. But we have an appointment to keep, come on." She waited for him to turn and follow before she took off again.

He followed, lost in his own thoughts until she stopped in front of an unfamiliar store. It was a large building, several towering stories tall. The entire front wall on the bottom floor was nothing but glass. A

large wooden sign painted a garish shade of violet simply proclaimed the store's name in extremely loopy writing. Jean-Loup's.

No other embellishment was needed for one to know the purpose of the store. Even if there hadn't been bolts of cloth, every color of the rainbow and more, tucked high up on the shelves and leaning against the windows. The mannequins that took up most of the windows would have given it away. They were all dressed in fine robes of shimmery silks and flowy cotton. He may not know much about fashion but even Harry could appreciate how fine they looked.

It wasn't Madam Maulkin's. Harry had never even heard of this Jean-Loup in the future, for whatever reason he didn't work out of this building then. Nor was this the shop that Madam Maulkin owned. It was odd how much that bothered him....maybe it was because Madam Maulkin had been one of the first witches he interacted with after learning about the wizarding world. It only made his melancholy deepened.

Until they approached the door and the mannequin closest to the entrance opened it for them! Harry jumped back, peering into the blank face of the dress dummy. But when it did nothing more than stand there holding the door he relaxed. Just a fraction. With hesitant steps, Harry skirted the mannequin and entered the shop. Noting as he passed that all the other mannequins in the room moved as well. Subtle, graceful movements. Almost like dancing, but in such a slow manner than hadn't noticed it at first.

Cane didn't take notice of Harry as he gaped at the dress dummies. Stuck somewhere between horror and awe. Cane marched through the room, a woman on mission, and rang the bell at the counter with enough force that the ding resounded through the room.

"One second!" A clear, accented voice rang throughout the shop before a man with wavy, honey brown hair swept through a velvet curtain from the back. He was tall, with broad shoulders, though the rest of him was quite slender. Though that could have just been the cut of his shimmery, form fitting robes. He gave them both a bright smile as his crystalline blue gaze raked over them both. "School robes?"

"Yes, and some for daily wear." Cane said, all business as she reached into her robes and handed him a folded bundle of papers. "Put everything on this account, it has already been settled with Gringotts." He took the papers from Cane with a wide grin as Cane turned back to

Harry.

"I don't need to be here for this," Cane said shortly, and Harry very much got the impression that staying would probably cause her great pain.

He laughed softly at her discomfort. "I'll be fine from here. I'll head back to the Cauldron when I'm finished?"

"Yes, that's good." She checked her wrist watch before heading to the door. "I have some errands, if I'm not back by the time the proctor gets there I'll just see you at dinner."

"Okay." He called softly as she hurried out the door the mannequin held for her. Harry watched until she disappeared beyond the windows. He might not be too happy with his pseudo babysitter, but she seemed far more uncomfortable than he was. It was almost funny.

The rustling of papers behind him caught his attention. He wasn't alone here. Though when he turned the man was still looking over them, his smirk, like a satisfied cat, only grew as he read.

"Well then," He said, tucking the papers into his robes before sticking out his hand to Harry. "I am Jean-Loup. Master clothier. Let's have a look at you!"

Harry shook his hand in mild trepidation at Jean-Loup's boisterous tone. "I'm Harry, ah...Evans." He really needed to work on not hesitating there. Harry Evans. Harry Evans. Harry Evans. He must try to remember.

Jean-Loup gasped, instead of releasing his hand he firmed his grip and pulled Harry over to large standing mirror and had him stand on a small wooden stool in front of it. "Look at you!" His voice was much softer as he leaned close to look at Harry through the mirror. "So delicate and beautiful, such lovely features and the build of a china doll. Are you part veela, perhaps?"

"Umm..." Harry leaned a bit away from the man, obviously he was crazed. "No...I'm not a-"

He was cut off as Jean-Loup made a frustrated noise. His hands reaching up to fluff Harry's hair. "But who ever is dressing you should be shamed, yes?" He glared at Harry's glasses like they had done him a personal wrong before snatching them off his face. "This I can work with, though."

From his robes he pulled a out a wand of a wood that was almost violet. He tapped Harry's glasses a few times, muttering a string of words that Harry couldn't follow. When he placed them back on Harry's face they were different, less noticeable. The black frames changed into a thin gold wire and the shape brought out his cheek bones and made his bright green eyes stand out. The whole process had taken only seconds.

"Such an improvement! Don't you think, lovely veela?" Jean-Loup asked, leaned over Harry shoulder to smile at their reflections.

"It is..." It was quite a change. Even someone who cared so little for fashion as he had to admit he looked much more handsome without the thick black frames. "But I'm not a veela, sir."

"Jean-Loup." Jean-Loup corrected absently, not paying attention to Harry's protests of veela DNA. He stood back, simply running his eyes over Harry for a while, a finger running over his lips in thoughts. With a snap of his fingers a large screen of carved wood surrounded them. "You must strip down so that I can take measurements."

Harry sighed, but began unbuttoning his borrowed robe. At least this part was familiar enough. Behind him Jean-Loup gasped once the robe was off. "What is this?" He called, marching around Harry and pointing to his muggle street clothes.

"Eh, they're-"

"Hideous. Terrible, bulky underclothes. They look what the muggles wear. Take them off! Take them off!" He yelled, tossing his hands in the air to hurry Harry along. "When Jean-Loup makes you clothes you wear the proper undergarments. Nothing bulky to warp the line. Ah...that is better. Now hold still."

Harry tossed his muggles jeans and shirt to the floor and tried to stand as still as he could in just his underpants. While he knew some of his classmates who were from wizarding families chose to wear nothing under their robes, he had always worn jeans and a shirt. The school robes were baggy enough and weren't hot even in the summer sun. It wasn't frowned on in his time, but it looked like he wouldn't be getting away with it here.

Honestly that shouldn't be surprising. He would never forget that wizard at the World Cup who very proudly proclaimed he wore nothing under his acquired nightgown. Really the whole way the older generations of wizards handled muggle clothing should have made it

obvious they had nothing under their robes.

It had just never been something Harry had ever wanted to think about.

The magical measuring tape raced across his body. Tickling his ribs, twisting around his ankles, and twinging through his fingers. He knew he was small, and thinner now that he had been a few weeks before thanks to his return to the Dursley's and only eating once every few days or so. He never had any trouble with his robes not fitting as well from the beginning to the end of the school though. So he kept his mouth shut on the subject and just let Jean-Loup figure everything out.

"You are a Hogwarts student, yes?" Harry nodded and Jean-Loup ducked around the screen for a moment. "What house?" He called over the rustling of cloth from somewhere in the room.

"Erm, I'm a....transfer student." They would have to sort him again?! He was not looking forward to that.

"Ah, yes. I had a few the year before. Such times we live in." Jean-Loup murmured to himself as he came back with his arms full of black cloth. "These have just the Hogwarts crest, the house elves fix them for you once you are sorted." He explained as he handed the bundle to Harry. "Try one on for me."

Harry hesitated, hand's stalling on the smooth fabric of the robe he was handed. "This....is this silk?"

"Of course." Jean-Loup said as though it was completely ordinary to wear silk robes to school. He gazed at Harry curiously, head slightly tilted, his warm, almost violet eyes bright with excitement. "The uniforms are rather standard. Boring. Though mine are the best, if I do say so myself."

Maybe it was standard in this time. He hadn't felt more like a fish out of water since landing in this era until he was shrugging on a silk school robe, though. Hopefully that would be the only real change for a while.

He had to admit that the silk was nice. Cool against his skin. Breezy, though the weave felt strong under his finger tips. It was also a bit more form fitting. Closer to the robes that Jean-Loup wore than the ones he'd seen on the aurors. These had a full skirt....for he couldn't think of any other word for it, loose sleeves that billowed at his hands

and fit a bit more snugly, though not uncomfortably, around his chest and stomach.

“I will add the undergarments to the list, yes? Silk for summer and spring and wool for the winter and autumn.” Jean-Loup made notes on a slip of parchment, talking to himself more than Harry.

After the school robes were tweaked to his liking, Jean-Loup’s face lit up as he swept from the changing area to bustle about his shop, all the while talking to himself about veelas and rare beauties and delicate dolls. Harry just let him be. Jean-Loup was loud, and loud people could be unpredictable. One never knew what direction such high energy could turn to on the drop of a hat.

But Jean-Loup seemed harmless. His only intent was to dress Harry up. Make him ‘lovely’. And Harry couldn’t really care much either way. He had never picked out clothes for himself before, always stuck with Dudley’s hand me downs for muggle clothes. And buying the basic Hogwarts school robes did not count as clothes shopping.

Even now he wasn’t sure if it could truly count as him shopping for himself. As it was Jean-Loup, who hand picked and brought forth every robe, held it to Harry’s face for a while before either tossing it unceremoniously over the screen and out of sight, or ushering Harry into it. All the while going on about empire cuts, and bodices, and hidden hems, and all manner of things Harry didn’t know anything about.

In the end he was unable to leave the shop with anything less than seven casual robes in various shades, two sets of dress robes, one a deep crimson one an dusty rose color that he was unsure of, but which Jean-Loup insisted looked fantastic on him. He had the required three sets of school robes and standard black velvet cloak. Along with two casual cloaks, one a bright white he feared would never stay clean, and the other deep emerald. He had a massive stack of undergarments and two pairs of buckle shoes that he tried to refuse, but that Jean-Loup had placed in his bags and wouldn’t take back.

The whole experience left him confused and tired, which seemed to be Jean-Loups goal. He stood back, grinning like a giant cheshire cat as Harry buttoned up the front of the mint green robes Jean-Loup had picked for him. The cut was slim, very much like his school robes actually, though Jean-Loup insisted they were different. Harry couldn’t for the life of him tell how.

“Almost perfect!” He chirped once Harry had stepped back to get a good look at himself. And like the glasses before, he had to agree that these robes were far more flattering than anything he’d ever worn before. Making him look slender instead of just thin, the color bringing out his eyes and the color in his cheeks to help him not seem so pale. “There is just one thing, and I could not let you leave without it!” From his robes he took out a small amber jar, when he took the top off their little changing area filled with the smell of fresh berries and mint. “Just a little bit, it goes a long way.”

Harry was confused until Jean-Loup took a little on his finger, rubbed it into his hands and then ran his hands over Harry’s hair. The change was instant. Any parts that were still flying free, refusing to be tamed by comb or length, fell into smooth waves.

Harry blinked, turning his head back and forth and enjoying the way his hair was bouncing. Bouncing! For the first time ever! “That’s amazing! Nothing has ever made it smooth before!”

“Because this is French.” Jean-Loup supplied as though it was very obvious. “If it isn’t French it is trash.”

Harry laughed lightly. “Did it grow too?” Now that he was looking at it wasn’t just close to brushing his shoulders any longer, it swept over them and even trailed down lower in the back.

“No, no. It just smooths out the strands. Makes them look longer. Though.” He leaned forward and whispered, like he was imparting a great secret. “It does stimulate the growth. It’s my special family secret.” He placed the jar into one of Harry’s bags. “You tell, Jean-Loup when you run out. More will come.”

“Thank you. For everything.” Harry looked back at the mirror and couldn’t help but smile at what he saw. The color of the robes brightened his face, and along with the new style of his glasses really brought out his eyes. His hair for the first time ever fell in soft waves, framing his face. And the cut of the robes helped him look his age, a more mature cut even on his thin frame. No one would mistake him for a child now! “This is amazing.”

Jean-Loup beamed at the praise. He was the best, so he had said. Harry was more than inclined to agree. He left the shop feeling lighter than he would have thought possible. Only the slight nagging that he should have perhaps paid for a bit of his new wardrobe with his own money to bring back down a bit. Seeing as how most of it was not for

school he really shouldn't have let the Hogwarts fund pay for it all. But Jean-Loup said that the forms had been clear. Everything he wanted was already taken care of. His conscience said he should have pushed harder.

His coin purse on the other hand was happy that his diminished fortune stayed put.

It was later than he had thought it would be. Well past noon, according to the sun's position. There was still time before his tests, enough for him to make it back to the Leaky Cauldron and put his new things up, maybe grab a bowl of soup as well. He wasn't too hungry, but it would probably help his focus for the exam if he had something on his stomach. Or at least he hoped it would. He was horribly unprepared for such a test.

He chuckled softly to himself as he strolled down the cobbled path. He might be nervous having to take tests he'd had no time at all to prepare, but if Hermione had been in this position she'd have lost her mind already. And probably have pulled out most of her hair in worry.

What was the worse that could happen really? It wasn't like he knew anyone....besides this younger, stranger version of Dumbledore. There was no one to impress or worry about what people might say here. So what if he ended up failing a little? He would probably be given some extra classes, he'd never seen anyone actually held back in Hogwarts before. Not even Neville. And he was much worse in potions than Harry was.

So he might take longer to graduate if he was found lacking. What was the rush anyway? For the first time in his life Harry was going to take a step back, and let things happen as they would. No more pointless concerns. No more shouldering other's burdens for them. It was time to slow down and just live.

The pub was much quieter now than it had been at breakfast. Only a few patrons sat at tables, most had papers spread around them and quills busy as they worked in the comforting gloom. Harry passed through with barely a second glance, and if eyes lingered it wasn't the oppressive stares of those from his time. Judging. Waiting for him to do something extraordinary or reckless for their amusement or benefit.

Once his new robes and undergarments, which he had been mortified

to find out were nothing but flimsy, almost sheer slips....though they were actually quite comfortable, were properly stowed, he was able to head down for a light lunch.

He got a small bowl of chicken stew and wasn't even surprised when Tom told him that all of his meals during his stay were taken care of already, refusing to even look at Harry's money when he tried to pay. The Dumbledore of this time really seemed to take his role of caregiver to Hogwarts students seriously. Never had the Dumbledore of his time gone to such lengths to assure the comfort of a student in need

By the time the Ministry proctor arrived Harry had finished his soup and was pacing, restless, across his room. The wizard was an elder man with kind eyes and bushy grey hair. He explained the process of the test in a soothing voice that, though it was comforting, didn't dissolve all of Harry's nervousness. But soon he was seated at the desk, a series of charms and wards around the room kept all from getting in and blurred the view from the window. Presumably so that Harry couldn't get answers from someone outside, two stories up.

His palms were sweaty, his hands slightly shaking as he set to, even as he worked to control his breathing. Telling himself it wasn't a big deal really didn't seem to be helping once he was there and looking the test in the eyes.

But, to his utter amazement and glee, it really wasn't that bad.

At the first question it was obvious this test was to see his entire magical knowledge. The questions that began the exam were all things he'd learned in his first year. From there it slowly became more advanced. Though even when he was almost two thirds through he was still finding it to be not overly taxing.

Even the potions portions weren't too hard. Probably because it was more about what herbs and ingredients did what, and how long something should be on the flame, and he was not required to actually make said potions. The theory had always been easier than the practice, in his experience.

Only the last little bit of the test gave him pause, and by then it might have been the time wearing on him. Either way he didn't care much if he botched a few answers about history. He was never prone to remembering all the dates and details, and knew very few people outside of Hermione who could.

The sun had dipped to the horizon when he was finished. He hadn't even noticed that his proctor had lit the lamps in his room around them as it grew darker until he sat back, blinking his tired eyes. The proctor, who's name Harry's frazzled mind had not been able to latch onto, and now he was a bit too embarrassed to ask, collected the test with the promise that he would have his results and a list for school books within the next day before bustling out the room. Leaving Harry in the near dark alone.

The day had been very tiring. He hadn't done more than a few random chores in the past two months. Spending a day on his feet, trying on what felt like a entire shop's worth of robes, and then taking a very strenuous test had left him quite drained.

He crossed the room and turned the lock on the door. Hopefully if Cane came knocking to call him for dinner he would already be fast asleep and able to ignore her.

Well...he doubted he would be fast asleep, but he would ignore her all the same. There was a bone deep weariness in him that couldn't be helped by a meal he didn't really need.

He slipped out of his nice new mint green robes, taking pains to smooth them out and hang them in the wardrobe before slipping into the bed in just his under robe. Slip? Shift? Whatever it was actually called he had plenty of them and no actual nightclothes, so they would have to suffice.

He took off his glasses, now delicately reworked. Magic would never cease to amaze him. How something could be reworked so easily. He placed them on the nightstand and burrowed into the plush bedding. His wand placed carefully under his pillow, he curled into the blankets, bracketed on all sides by the many soft pillows. He allowed himself to relax, his heavy eyes falling shut.

And when a knock came at his door an hour later, Harry didn't even hear it.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, dears! Welcome back!

This took so much longer than I wanted it to, but things got busy there for a bit. My dad visited for a week, then we were traveling all over the place, and it took me forever to get back in the swing of things to get this edited!

But it's done now. YAY!

This chapter was.....kinda plain, but needed. I think we'll end up in Hogwarts by the end of next chapter. Or at least I hope we do.

Okay, now to see if I remember all that I wanted to say about these last two chapters, now that I have end notes that won't hang onto the entire fic like so much fungus!

I have added tags! I have changed the warning! Can't believe Harry being sixteen slipped my mind that first day (╯_╯;)

Don't fear the non-traditional ABO tag. It'll be very subtle. Though I did contemplate making this an omegaverse. It was just a lot to work in, and I'm new to writing this world, juggling magic and full on ABO sounds fun, but would need a lot more planning.

I assume that there are very real consequences to making Horcruxes, even just one. If there wasn't, more people would do it. As it stands, even people who are cool with killing someone still don't make them, even though they already did the biggest thing one needs to do in order to make one. I figure that after a few more there would be physical changes. Tom isn't changing physically yet, or at least not that he knows of since he only has the one, but he isn't the same anymore. I can't wait until his POV is a bit longer, I think by the next chapter he'll have more to say.

The Mannequin part....I'm not sure how many of you played Skyrim in the vanilla phase, before they fixed just a ton of glitches and made the textures better. There was this one glitch that only happened for me in a modded house that I had. This was before Hearthfire, so the only way to get a good free standing house was with mods. Well, this particular glitch caused the mannequins to move while you were out of the room. You'd go back in, and after the load screen turned to black you would hear the rustle of clothes and boots, and when the screen lit back up all you mannequins would be all over the place. Standing or running, or sitting around the room, frozen in place. It was FREAKY!! and yet funny all at once.

When I got to the clothes shop I thought this would be a fantastic thing for magical clothes makers to do. Enchanted Mannequins!! I would do it, what better way to show off how nice your robes flow!?

I have a character naming app on my phone where you put in the

nationality and gender and it gives you names. I like to shuffle through them until I find both a surname and first name that I like....Completely at random I choose Basil Burke for one of my characters.....and I can't even believe this is so, but I didn't remember Burke was an important name until I started this chapter and remembered Borgin and Burke's.....evidently it's one of the pureblood families!!! SOOOO we can assume, because I'm not going to change it now, I rather like the name Basil Burke, that his man is the cousin of the Burke who owns the dark artifacts store. Maybe he's the white sheep of the family.

I absolutely know that in the last month there was more I wanted to say here....and I've forgotten it now...which is so very typical. So let me know if you have questions and concerns and I'll do my best to answer them

I'm so happy with the response to this story so far. There's parts I'm just dying to get to, now that we have introductions out of the way and we'll be jumping into the real meat of the story very soon!! Can't wait for our guys to meet! Well, you know, beyond running into each other in a crowded room that is. They won't know it was them. Harry's make over means Tom won't realize it was him, and Harry wasn't paying enough attention to who he ran into. Poor Harry doesn't even know what he's about to walk into!

Thank you all so much for reading!!! Your fantastic responses and the kudos mean so much to me!! I hope you all enjoyed this chapter as well.

Next Time!!

Tom gets ready for school with his....friends.

Harry is sorted into his new house.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the size of the first two combined...I don't know how that happened....please enjoy!

☆*:..o(≧▽≦)o..*:☆

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter 3

A Ministry official came the next day when Harry was just about to slip out of the inn. He wanted to explore, to see what exactly had changed, or would change in the future. The alley was new, the world felt new! He almost felt new as well. Then he was forced to face reality.

It wasn't the same man from the night before, for which Harry was quite happy...he still couldn't remember what his name was...

Instead it was a witch with bright green robes and flaming red hair who, in the most gratingly chipper voice he could imagine, said her name was Annabelle Thomas. She pulled him aside in the Cauldron's common room in late morning gloom, guided him to a table in the corner. Harry found himself nursing a cup of tea, that he didn't want, as she discussing things that, quite honestly, he didn't care about.

Rationally he knew should care. Hermione would have done more than scold him for such an attitude, even a year ago he himself would have found such apathy in his future unthinkable. Now though, as the witch before him talked of scores and fields that would be good for him to go into he realized a few things.

One, he was not nearly as bad in school as he had thought. Not that he had felt necessarily dull, just mindnumbingly average. Ms Thomas, however, seemed to think he was rather advanced for his age. Which after she assured him that she knew Harry was sixteen, was actually a very pleasant surprise.

The second thing he realized, quite extraordinarily and after she had asked after his career goals, was that he, Harry Potter, no longer

wished to be an Auror.

He had been saying it for so long now that no one really even asked him anymore. Either that or they simply couldn't think of anything else The Chosen One would do after defeating the Dark Lord. Clearly he would go into a field that assured his dark wizard prowess was used to its fullest. He had known the path that needed to be taken to be an Auror, set his schedule by it, had even been able to see himself, along with Ron, living out this long held dream.

How many times had he and Ron stayed up talking out it, especially in the last year? The advent of the DA had only served to strengthen Ron's resolve to become a dark wizard hunter. At the time, Harry had thought it had done the same for him as well.

Just the icing on the cake he'd been baking for years.

An easy, knee jerk reflex he didn't need to think about anymore. Always on the tip of his tongue. In the back of his mind.

And he couldn't bring himself to say it.

Somewhere along the way Harry had stopped wanting that. When exactly the joy had faded. When knowing looks of those he told stopped filling him pride and started itching at his nerves.

It was then that he realized something else. Something wonderful.

He could be whatever the hell he wanted now!

He hadn't been able to give her a definitive answer about his future career choices, to which she had been very helpful and understanding. Assuring him that he still had two years worth of schooling left, and really he could decide and change his mind as often as he wanted. He had his whole life before him and he should find the one thing that made him truly happy and do it.

No one had ever told him that before.

Once he had a his classes planned, which was pretty much what he'd been taking before, as such classes were needed for a myriad of careers, he was allowed to go about his day as he pleased.

And so, he spent the rest of the summer doing just that.

It took only one afternoon to gather all his supplies for the school

year, everything fitting in with what he expected. His charms books, history, transfiguration, potions, and quite a few more defense against the dark arts book than he was expecting, but nothing that looked too daunting. He even had one for divination, a small book on reading portents. There wasn't a book for care of magical creatures, but then he hadn't really used the one Hagrid assigned them, so it would probably be fine.

He couldn't find the color changing ink that he had enjoyed so much in his time, but there were several jeweled tones that caught his eye, red, blue, and green in particular. He needed new pens, a cauldron, and well...everything. He'd needed to make several trips to get it all back to the Cauldron, but it had still only eaten up an afternoon.

It took another three days for Harry to talk himself into going into the broom store with the intent of buying the racing broom on display. It was lovely, really. Not his Firebolt by any means. But the handle gleamed and the bristles were smooth, almost feather soft to his touch. He placed it in his trunk with care, already eager to take it out when he got to Hogwarts. Quidditch might be out of the question, he couldn't just barge in and expect to have a position on the team of whatever house he ended up in.

But he could still fly.

No one could take that away from him once he was back at the castle.

The rest of the summer flowed nicely, if a bit on the boring side. Not that he was every going to complain about a little monotony. He'd had far too much excitement in his life already, thank you. He was pleased enough to spend his days having an ice cream in the sunshine when the days permitted and tucked away in a tea shop when the days were grey and the thunder drowned out the roaring of the crowds. Either way he watched them, all the magical people as they scurried about their days.

And when he tired of imagining what their lives must be like he read a little. He wasn't overly worried about classes now, but there really wasn't anything else for him to do. No one to talk to. Cane was there every evening a meal that she insisted they share. He supposed it so that she could report to whoever that she was making sure Harry was still alive and eating. Other than that, well....There was no one that knew Harry. And if he recognized a face his joy at prospect of striking up a conversation was quickly dampened in the reality that they didn't know him. At all.

He would have to start those relationships all over again.

September couldn't come soon enough, and though the days seemed to drag forever, one night Cane sat before him at the little table that had become theirs over the last month and asked him something he hadn't been prepared for.

"How do you want to get to Hogwarts tomorrow?"

Harry snapped his gaze up from his plate of shepherd's pie, in the month he'd been there, away from the Dursley's, he'd been steadily trying to eat a little more. Working his way back to three full meals a day. A slower process than most seemed to think. Cane still gave him odd looks if he didn't eat at least most of his dinner. So he had worked out a schedule. A light breakfast of toast and tea, a light lunch of soup, or just ice cream....no one paid much attention to him at lunch time. And his dinners were something heavier, something meal like. He even managed to eat it all most of the time.

"How?" He asked cautiously.

"Well, there's the train." Cane said, taking up her own fork and tucking into her pie. "Takes off at King's Cross, all the kids take it. Barring a few exceptions here and there, which." She fixed her eyes to him, stern but not unkind. "Your situation it...well can call for a little leeway. If you'd rather not have people bother you, and trust me you'll get a lot of that once you're at Hogwarts. Kids love a new face. Well, if you wanted. I could apparate you to Hogsmeade. You'd avoid the stares and questions, for a time."

Harry smiled at her, they hadn't really connected in his time there. Dinners, a few hellos here and there, and the occasional fielding of questions about how Harry's day went was all the interaction between them. But he liked Cane. She got him to a certain extent. Knew he wanted the silence, the calm. Like now. "That does sound better. If it isn't too much trouble."

"Of course not. I can have you there and be back in London in a flash."

"Thank you." He said sincerely.

Cane shrugged and simply said. "It's nothing, kid." before going back to her dinner. A steady, welcome silence between them.

Just before sunset on September 1st Cane transported Harry from the

beautifully sunny, albeit rather chilly, Diagon Alley, to the gloomy, rain soaked streets of Hogsmeade. She helped him get to the station before wishing him luck and making a quick exit. After a month of casual acquaintanceship Harry was more than used to Cane's abruptness. In fact it was one of things he liked best about her. She didn't linger, didn't press too hard about his past. Didn't pretend that she wanted to befriend a teenager when it was clearly the last thing she wanted. She was just some Auror the Ministry had dropped a homeless, lost child on and now that she'd seen that he was safe she was free to go back to her bachelorhood in peace.

Harry liked her a lot.

The train wasn't there yet, and through the gloom it was difficult to tell how close it was to the station. Even with one of his new cloaks wrapped snugly around him Harry didn't fancy standing in the rain waiting the train. He supposed that he could wait inside the station, or a shop....but there were already a few carriages right there waiting.

He knew where he was going, and no one was there yet to greet him....

Dragging his magically lightened trunk up to one of the carriages, he loaded it in before headed up to the front. The Thestral was lovely, stoic, it blinked a curious, red veined eye at him as he came forward to stroke softly at its mane. "Hello there," he said gently, "Mind taking me up to the castle really quick? You can be back before the train gets here, I'm sure."

The Thestral whinnied and tossed its head, which Harry took as a yes. "Thanks!" he said cheerily, patting it on the back and jumping into the carriage. As soon as the door was closed, Harry settled into the warm, plush seats, they were off.

A lone black carriage trudging its way through the growing gloom and steady rain.

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"Did you do it?"

Tom rose his gaze from the book he'd been trying, with little luck, to

read. The movement lazy, unconcerned. Alphard Black was always so excitable. Like an overly affectionate dog. Tom had learned years ago that he would calm down after a fashion if one didn't engage him. He was only in Tom's inner circle because Orion had begged it of him. Tom thought it was more so that Orion could keep an eye on his erratic cousin than any real belief that he could of use to Tom. And if was only the year before when Alphard earned his prefect badge that he had even agreed.

Which was why he was allowed in their compartment, seated not on one of the velvet seats but on the floor just in front of Tom's feet. He did manage to not actually touch him. If one thing could be said about Alphard Black in his favor, it would be that he didn't make the same mistake twice.

Tom turned back to his book.

Of course that didn't stop Alphard, who asked once again, "Did you really do it, my lord?" Tom couldn't help the slight uptick to his lips at the title. They never used his chosen name, only refereed to him as their lord in private. When in public referred to him simply as Tom, or Riddle depending on how good of friends they appeared to be to others. One must keep up appearances, after all.

Yes he was pleased that Alphard could remember his place in the pecking order, but Tom wasn't about to talk about that on the train. ! Quite a few of them were prefects all, with him as the Head Boy, they had to keep the compartment unlocked and unwarded to allow the other students access to them. Alphard should know how to keep his mouth shut.

"He said he would, do not bother him with inane, and inappropriate questions." Alexander Rosier sat beside Tom, always to his right though Tom had never specifically told him to do so. If he could consider anyone from his inner circle a friend it would be Rosier, and he knew it. He never took the rank for granted, though. There was a reason he was Tom's favorite.

Instead of cowing Alphard's....enthusiasm, it only perked him up further. "Really? Where is it? Do you have it here?" He asked jubilantly, eyes flicking to where Tom's trunk rested on the rack by the door.

Like he would keep it there.

No, the Horcrux rested safely, soothingly, against his chest in a pocket

inside his robes. He was very skilled at creating such things, though he never did so where any of his followers could see. They didn't need to know about how Tom Riddle had needed to learn how to mend his own clothing growing up, just that Lord Voldemort had hidden pockets in his robes from which he could pull any manner of useful thing.

It wasn't as though he did it by hand anymore either way. It was all for appearances.

All the world was a stage, so the saying goes. And if all the people of the world were simply players acting out their parts, then Tom Riddle was the star of the show.

Stretched out across the seat from Tom, all long legs and flowing blond hair, was Abraxas Malfoy. He gazed wistfully out the window, grey eyes locked on where he thought the castle should be as they moved ever closer. Not that he could see anything through the sheeting rain. Abraxas sighed. "Hard to believe this is it. The last time we'll be making this trip." Most everyone in the compartment other than Alphard and the other Slytherin prefects were in their seventh and final year. And though Tom didn't really do sentimentality, he couldn't deny a certain degree of nostalgia in the thought that would never again be making this exact trip.

He did not by any means expect to leave Hogwarts behind for good.

Just before the train pulled into the station the rest of the prefects and the Head Girl, a Ravenclaw by the name of Esme Clarke, filed through their compartment in waves. They got their assignments from Tom and Tom alone. Technically Esme was the same rank as he, but she had her nose so wedged into her books that she hardly took note of the prefects that were supposed to be under her. Not that she was completely inefficient. She was swift to anger and dolled out punishments with a firm, unfeeling, hand that cared not which House the perpetrator hailed from.

The trouble was getting her to pay attention enough to the world around her in the first place.

As the last of the riff raff finally left them the train pulled into the station. Everyone rose to squirrel away books and cards that had served as their past time, taking the last few minutes to straighten up. Magically steam wrinkles from their robes, or fix their hair in the pocket mirror Fulcran Lestrage always seemed to have on his person.



Tom surreptitiously touched the small, leather bound book through his robes. Enough of the passengers in that compartment had seen him with it before. They wouldn't question it if they saw it now. But he was still hesitant to take it out. He wouldn't, couldn't leave it in his trunk. Not yet. The house elves took their things from the carriages and Tom would never let a part of his soul be handled by unfamiliar hands.

He liked to keep it close by as well. It made the gas lamps on the compartment walls burn just a little bright, the air around him turned a little warmer. He couldn't keep it on his person all the time, but once in his room, a private room this year thanks to his new status as Head Boy, he could set it up so that the book would be safe. Until then.

"Oh bugger all!" Alphard suddenly shrieked into the calm, his nose pressed firmly to the window.

"Alphard!" Orion yelled, appalled. "Language!"

"Sorry, it's just..." He looked at them sheepishly from over his shoulder. "One of the carriages is already heading back to the castle. We won't be the first ones there now."

"Surely you're just seeing things incorrectly." Abraxas said, steaming out the creases of his robes with a lazy flick of his wand.

"No I'm not!" Alphard shot at him haughtily. "I know what coming and going looks like."

Tom stretched his neck slightly to peer over the others and out the window, he was a good bit taller than everyone else and with his improved night vision he could easily make out a lone carriage heading towards the school. "You're right, Alphard," he said softly, "Probably it is just someone who apparated to Hogsmeade and didn't want to wait out in the rain for everyone."

Technically most everyone in their compartment could have done the same. All the seventh years had their license, and it was only Tom among them that had to be there. The others chose to accompany him more than the tradition of the riding the train in.

"Why does it matter anyway?" Orion asked, he didn't wait for Alphard's reply though before pulling him away from the widow and setting him a myriad of arduous tasks, like combing his hair and unrolling his sleeves, to keep him busy.

"I had a bet going with that Hufflepuff, Cyndi, that we'd beat her and the rest to the castle."

Tom sighed, blocking out the chatter as he left the compartment, his followers filing out and fanning around him to start the business of herding the underclassmen to the carriages. It was time to start the year in true.

And Tom had plans.

It was going to be a good year.

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Harry jumped down from the carriage, narrowly avoiding landing in a tall puddle but sheer luck. As soon as his feet hit the ground the Thestral turned about-face and head off back to the station....taking Harry's trunk with it!

"Well...damn..." Harry said with a soft sigh. There goes his clothes and books, and he could either slog through the rain and mud to try, and most likely fail, to catch up with a Thestral pulled carriage and then wade all the way back with his trunk, or just let it go and have faith that it would return with his trunk and the house elves would take over like always.

So really, no choice at all.

He sighed again.

"Harry, I didn't expect you to be so early." Dumbledore's voice held a note of distress, though when Harry turned around he was all bright eyed smiles and cheer. And again Harry was struck with how much younger this Dumbledore was, and it wasn't just the color of his hair. His Dumbledore had a much better poker face than this one, his kind, grandfatherly demeanor more believable.

"Um, hello, sir." Harry gave one last longing look toward the carriage before stepping inside. "Auror Cane apparated me here...well, to the station."

Dumbledore gave him a kind smile, gesturing for Harry to follow him

in. "Good, good. I'm just glad you made it here safely. I trust you had an enjoyable summer."

Harry nodded, his hair and cloak were soaked and he felt rather chilled as Dumbledore led him through the entrance to the great hall. "It was nice. Quiet."

"In times like these 'quiet' is often a luxury. I'm glad you were not troubled. And," he cast a wary glance down at Harry, "You are...well?"

Though they were alone, Harry knew it would be foolish for Dumbledore to speak of his past there. Ghosts, and of course Peeves, could be lurking around in their invisible forms. It was safest to assume they were not alone. He got Dumbledore's meaning anyway. "Yes, I...I'm adjusting." He said with smile he hoped was reassuring.

He'd had his bouts of melancholy, sure. Reality always had a tendency to catch up with him, especially in the dark night. But there wasn't anything he could do about it. And in his more lucid moments, warmed by the sun and unburdened by the weight of so many people's expectations, he knew that he didn't want to go back.

Not yet.

Maybe in a year or two he'd feel different and he could start looking then. Nineteen ninety six wasn't going anywhere. His friends, and the war, could just wait. It wouldn't be anytime to them, what would they care that Harry had his little break while they were essentially on pause.

"Good, splendid!" Dumbledore led him up the dais where the teacher's table was and through the door that led, as Harry was well aware, to a small sitting room. There was a fire burning merrily in the hearth and an overstuffed wingbacked chair sat before it. "You can wait in here, get warm by the fire. You'll be sorted after the first years, and I dare say it'll be a while to get them all herded inside."

Harry smiled, already he could hear a few lowered voices as the teachers began to take their seats, they must have come in right after he and Dumbledore entered the hall.

"Thank you, sir."

"Right, well. See you in a tick." He said brightly before rushing off.

Harry took out his wand, waved it in a low arch over his robes and hair to dry off. His hair was now curling a bit from the rain, but mostly Jean-Loup's serum kept it neat and sleek despite the unwanted moisture.

He took the seat before the fire and waited, feeling oddly nervous though he knew exactly what to expect. The whole place had just a strange air to it now. It was the same though, right down the tapestry of the school's crest that hung large and bright against the stone wall.

If the castle was the same, he supposed that meant he must be what changed...in how many different ways could he have possibly changed in one summer though?

His thoughts were disturbed as the first years began pouring into the room through a side door. They were a fidgety lot who took in the one occupant of the room and honed in on him. Before he knew it he was surrounded by children!

"Are you a professor?" One girl with glossy black curls asked him with wide and wondrous eyes.

"Of course he isn't, Clara, look at him. He's too young for that!" A boy with the same curls and bright eyes said, probably a brother or cousin. He turned to Harry, arms crossed over his chest. "Why are you here and not out there?"

All the kids had gathered around him, staring at him and murmuring to each other. He could well remember what it had been like on his first night, they were nervous, even their haughty leader.

"I'm a transfer student," he said simply, "I have to get sorted too."

"That makes sense," the boy said confidently. This seemed to relax those around them a bit. It wouldn't be so bad, Harry didn't seem worried, so they shouldn't be afraid either.

"What'd you think it'll be?" One of them asked to the room at large.

"My brother said it's a test we have to take in front of everyone else."

"I heard they make you drink a terrible potion and somehow that tells you where to go."

"What do you think it is?" Clara asked Harry suddenly, her black curls bounced as she tilted her head at him.

“Well...” Harry lifted a hand to rub at his chin in faux thought, fighting back a grin. “When I was your age I had to fight to troll to get into my old school.”

There were gasps and even yelps of glee at the mention of fighting trolls, Harry couldn’t fight back a small smile any longer. “But I hear they don’t use troll at Hogwarts. It’s difficult to get them past the wards, you know,” Harry leaned back in chair, folding his hands on his lap, delicate and unaffected. “We will probably have to prove ourselves by winning over the trust of Hippogriff”

“A Hippogriff?”

“No way!”

“Wait, a what?”

The room dissolved into frantic muttering as some proclaimed they could take on a troll or Hippogriff no problem, while some kids tried to explain what a Hippogriff was to their muggle-born counterparts.

A small boy with honey-brown hair lifted his wand up warily. “I don’t know any magic though. Not even that one spell Samwell said was easy didn’t worked for me.”

“Because that wasn’t a real spell, you lout, Sam is a liar.” The boy with the black curls said with a massive roll of his eyes.

Before the other boy could manage a retort a shadow fell over their little group and he looked up and up at Dumbledore with hopeful eyes. “We don’t really have to fight a troll, do we professor?”

“A troll?” Dumbledore said in exaggerated shock. “My word, no!”

“What about a Hippo...Hippo..”

“A Hippogriff?”

“Trolls and Hippogriff?” Dumbledore said softly in confusion, before his bright eyes locked onto Harry, who by this time was having a little bit of trouble not falling into a fit of laughter. He smiled back, giving Harry a wink that was very close to the sparkling way his Dumbledore used to joke around. “Unfortunately our shipment of Hippogriffs were late. This dreadful weather, you know. I’m afraid you’ll all just have to make do with the back up sorting methods.”

A few of the kids grumbled in disappointment, where a few, the boy with honey brown hair among them sighed in obvious relief. Dumbledore clapped his hands and began herding the kids away once more. "Line up by the door now, wait until I call you."

He looked back down at Harry, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Troll and Hippogriff, hum?"

Harry shrugged, smiling innocently. "Isn't part of the fun of being a first year the anticipation of what the sorting ceremony will be."

Dumbledore chuckled softly, taking out his wand to flicked it at the small table near Harry's chair and quaint little tea set appeared. "I'll call on you last. Just have some tea while you wait."

"Yes, sir. Thank you." With a knowing, departing look from Dumbledore, and nothing else to do, Harry made himself a cup of tea, relaxed back in the cozy chair. He positioned his head against one of the soft wings, and watched the first years file out of the room to be sorted. When the last few students walked through the door Harry stood and peaked around the frame.

The staff table was full. The only other face he knew apart from Dumbledore was the wizened wizard in navy robes. He rang a very faint bell that Harry was only just piecing together when Dumbledore called his name.

"Harry Evans!"

He must have said something to the hall first as everyone was sitting at attention when he stepped out. A few, tentative and uncertain students clapped before their neighbors shushed them. Harry tried not to feel their stares on him as he crossed the stage. Apart from noting how full the room was, he tried not to look too closely at the masses.

Dumbledore smile at him encouragingly as he approached the lone stool, climbed on top and waited for the hat to fall.

"Remember, the hat always knows where we need to be." Dumbledore said softly, as though he could pick up on the exact cause of Harry's discomfort.

In that way, he was very much Harry's Dumbledore.

The hat was placed on his head, and though it no longer dipped as far as it once had, it still covered his eyes. Plunging him into a familiar

and welcoming darkness.

‘Well, you’re not one of my sweet little first years.’ The hat’s laughter rang through Harry’s mind. ‘What an unexpected surprise to see you again, Harry Potter.’

Harry’s lips curved slightly. He didn’t even question how the Sorting Hat could know. The Hat always knew.

‘It’s a pleasure to see you again as well.’ Harry said in his thoughts.

‘Yes,’ the Hat hummed softly. ‘Now, to find a place for you to rest. I dare say I can’t put you back with your old pack. That lot is far too rowdy for your current....state.’

Harry nodded ever so softly. He hadn’t expected to go back to Gryffindor...didn’t actually want to, if he were being honest. It would only upset him to have to be surrounded by all the reds and golds without Hermione, Ron, and the twins there with him.

‘I thought so.’ The Hat said softly, obviously able to pick up on Harry’s thoughts and moods. ‘You’d find peace, as it were, with the Ravens. Though you would find great frustration there as well. No, no, that won’t be helpful at all.’

The Hat hummed to itself. ‘My sweet Badgers would always be too much for you. They could help you heal, yes. But you would end up wanting to strangle the lot of them before the month is out.’

‘You know then,’ The Hat said darkly, ‘What I’m going to suggest.’

He did, and for a wonder Harry found he also did not mind. Not like he had six years ago. Not even how he would have if the suggestion had come up three or even two years previous. Harry had met all types by now. Good Slytherins, brave Hufflepuffs, terrible Gryffindors. People were largely people, no matter what house they hailed from.

‘It’s fine.’ He thought, sure and steady.

‘As you wish. SLYTHERIN!’ The Hat yelled the last part into the silent hall, and three of the four tables erupted into cheers.

the sea of red and golds only gave him vague, half hearted attempts at applause that weren’t even trying, everyone else in the room seemed fine with the decision though.

Harry slid off the stool, handed the hat back to Dumbledore with a small smile, and headed for the last table of silver and green.

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Despite what many may think, Tom Riddle didn't dislike children. Well...not all children at least. Some came from good and influential families, it would be wasteful to not endear himself to them early on. They would grow up to remember that Tom was kind and ever helpful. Some children lacked the resources of the Higher Class peers, but he couldn't simply dismiss them off hand. They could grow to become powerful in their own right...not to mention showing blatant favoritism could be seen by others, could potential tarnish the reputation he'd worked so hard to perfect.

So he approached the children the same as he approached anyone, with a warm smile and kind deeds. He helped them stow their luggage and lifted the smaller ones into the carriages with gentle hands, thanking Salazar himself that at least for the night the first years weren't his problem. Second and third years were bad enough.

He sent another carriage of third years off with a relieved sigh. They were almost there, just a few more carriages remained and the fourth and fifth years pretty much too care of themselves. His prefects could handle any minor troubles that might arise there. His circle, his knights, had stayed behind to help. Most of them were not prefects but they acted like them all the same.

Alphard whined as another carriage left the station. There was only enough left for the prefects and his knights to take back. Tom resisted rolling his eyes at Alphard's melodrama. "You are a prefect, you must stay until the others are on their way, you know that. Why make a bet you cannot keep."

"It was her idea." He said, drifting off weakly at Tom's withering look. "Sorry, my lord."

"Just get in the carriage, Alphard." Tom snapped in annoyance. Alphard leaped away to claim one of the last carriages for them.

"Hey," he yelled, throwing open the compartment to stow their trunks. "There's already a trunk in here!"



Tom swept over to have a look, nestled in the compartment was a lone trunk. Pristine and new. There was no one else around the carriage though, he and his knights were now the last at the station. "It doesn't matter, just put ours in beside it."

Before he had even finished speaking a pair of pale, manicured hands flashed by him and opened the trunk. Tom raised an eyebrow at the perpetrator.

"What?" Abraxas smiled knowingly. "You know you wanted to look too."

And he did.

Though he could have refrained.

Abraxas was so impulsive. But Tom looked anyway. They didn't touch anything, just inspected the contents from they could see. There were several silk robes, in fact all the clothing he could see were silk. So whoever it was had money, but judging by the array of colors they weren't dealing with a muggleborn. He would have said it probably belonged to a witch, but there was a racing broom on top of it all. Not many witches flew on those.

"Interesting," he said softly. "Now close it and get in. I'm tired of being in the rain." Abraxas complied, curiosity giving way under Tom's stare and the promise of warmth and food.

"Betcha it was whoever left first." Alphard said excitedly from inside, Tom climbed in followed closely by Abraxas, Rosier, and Lestrangle. The others would have to take next carriage. "We probably got the fastest one of the lot!" He looked through the front window adoringly, though he couldn't see the Thestral. Of their entire ground only Tom and Rosier were able to view the death steeds.

Something the other knights were openly jealous of. A few had even begun to plot how best to rectify this.

Tom knew it was only a matter of time.

The Great Hall was just as vast and impressive as always. Something about being away for the summer always seemed to dampen the memory of it, each new year he looked on it with new eyes, just like the first time he ever stepped foot inside.

He settled down at the head of the table, his followers spreading out

around him, and waited for the arduous task of the sorting to get underway. His night would not be over then. There were still a few things to see to before his night could finally end. The first night back was most important. His followers needed the reminder that their summer was over, it was time for them to do his bidding once again.

The sorting commenced as always. Grimy little first years approaching The Hat with trepidation and fear, only to bounce away eager and happy once they were sorted. They got their fair share including a set of twins, a boy and girl with shiny black hair and the pale and delicate features of pure-bloods.

The last child slipped off to Hufflepuff and Tom readied himself for another dull, dull, dull speech from Dippet. But Dumbledore didn't take up The Hat and stool, instead he paused for a moment, his bright smile turning instantly sad, caring.

If there was one person who was just as good an actor as Tom, it was Albus Dumbledore.

"The hardships of the past few years, I know, are always close to our hearts, though we are protected within these warded walls. We are lucky. We have a duty to enfold those weary wanderers—"

Rosier sighed, tilting his head to Tom he said. "Another transfer."

Tom nodded, he too was more or less tuning Dumbledore out now, everyone else in the hall had also figured it out, a low chorus of whispers began to sound around the hall as an undertone to his speech.

"Join me in welcoming the newest edition to our esteemed institution, Harry Evans!"

There was a smattering of claps from some of the less intelligent members of the crowd who misread Dumbledore's enthusiasm and thought the occasion warranted an applaud. It died down quickly when a small, dark figure stepped out from the room near the teacher table.

He was small, though taller than the first years for sure, he still appeared minuscule compared to Dumbledore's height. He walked across the dais with graceful steps, his robes billowing around him telling all of their fine quality. He perched daintily on the stool, hands folded on his lap and waited for The Hat to be placed on his softly curling hair.

The whispers of the others fluttered around him.

“He’s so cute, look at him!”

“Small, though, isn’t he?”

“What year is he, did Dumbledore say?”

Had he? Tom tilted his head thoughtfully. No...he hadn’t

“Gotta be older than first years,” Alphard said matter of factly. “Else he’d be sorted with the others.”

“Twelve then,” Emaleigh Greengrass said from Alphard’s left with a swish of her pale blond hair. “He’d be a bit tall for it though.”

“I say thirteen. Looks thirteen, doesn’t he?” Another sixth year, half-blood, Tom didn’t know his name, said.

That started it, the others began naming their guesses, someone offered a bet of ten sickles that he was actually thirteen instead of twelve. Eventually eyes turned to him. Tom sighed.

“Fourteen.” He was the only one who said so, though Rosier nodded from beside him. A hush fell over the table once all bets were placed.

They waited.

“Having a right conversation with it, isn’t he?” Lestrangle said, laughing softly. It was taking an abnormal amount of time though.

Curious.

Finally The Hat sang out, “Sytherin!” and the table around them cheered loudly.

Tom leaned forward, pitching his voice to carry down to the sixth years. “Alphard!” He turned his shaggy head to Tom instantly. “Don’t you have prefect duties to see to?” Alphard just blinked at him dumbly. Tom forced a smile on his face, this was not the place to reprimand the boy, they must remain a single unit when out in public. “Go greet the boy, take him to sit with his year.”

Alphard’s face split into a huge smile before he bounded off the bench to lope towards Evans. The poor unsuspecting boy. He startled back when Alphard nearly ran him over in his haste. And who could blame him? Alphard leaned forward to say something to Evans, his ever

present smile widening at whatever it was Evans had said to him.

Alphard led him past the first years. Then the second years. Tom smirked when he was brought before the third years, he would have really been too tall for twelve, and now that he was closer he had a much more restrained and mature air about him. So much so that Tom wasn't even surprised when he was led on to the fourth years. There was a general groaning around his end of the table as those who had lost the bet already felt the lightening of their money pouches.

Then they were passing the fifth years, and Alphard came to a stop at the spot he had left before. "This," he said loudly, so that all those around him could hear. "Is Harry Evans, he's going to be a sixth year!"

Well that was a surprise, everyone seemed to agree as those not close enough to speak him personally began their whispers once more. The other sixths years began sending questions Evans' way. His voice was so low that Tom couldn't hear it when he answered, but whatever he said made a few of the others shy away with looks of guilt, regret, and sadness.

Interesting.

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Harry's heart nearly lodged in his throat has a young man who looked far too much like Sirius skipped towards him. He had to close his eyes and take a few deep breaths.

It wasn't him. Sirius wasn't born yet. He was far, far into the past. This was a relative. It had to be.

He introduced himself as Alphard Black, and Harry had a very clear memory of Sirius running his fingers over the singed remains where a name should have been on his family tree. Alphard Black, Sirius' uncle. He had given Sirius money to help him move away from his family and go live with Harry's father and his parents.

Suddenly he felt just a little less alone.

The questions fired at him once he sat at the table were nothing he

hadn't expected and prepared for. He wasn't even surprised when one of the first things he was asked was whether his parents were wizards. In the climate of the day, especially being sat among the Slytherins, he would have been surprised if they hadn't asked. Evans wasn't exactly a wizarding name, after all.

It seemed saying "My parents died when I was a baby and I recently lost my godfather who I had been living and traveling with," was a remarkable way to get people to stop asking him questions. He was allowed to then to stare blankly at his empty plate and sip on a cup of honey sweetened tea.

Usually the feasts were a time to sample a little of all the food placed before him. Not over eating so as to not be sick, but just a time to enjoy all the rich flavors of things he'd been denied while living with the Dursleys. But he just couldn't work up an appetite. It wasn't nearly as much fun as it usually was without Ron there to pack his cheeks full like a large orange squirrel, hilariously misplaced next to Hermione's ever prime and bird-like way of eating.

He would try again in the morning. He'll probably feel a bit more settled then.

He allowed the talk of the table to wash over him. The excited retelling of vacations in warm, war free zones. Exclamations over how much so and so had grown, or how great their new haircut looked. And when someone inquired about why he wasn't eating, he quickly said that he'd had dinner before. Feigning ignorance about a welcome feast.

The Headmaster spoke at the end of the feast, just like Dumbledore would have done in his time. Harry tried to focus on him, Headmaster Dippet was either very old, or simply an extremely frail man. His beard and hair, not nearly as long as Dumbledore's, were a washed out brown, more grey with a hint of the color that it used to be than truly brown itself. His face was lined and his eyes spoke of great exhaustion and stress. Harry had trouble following his soft voice as he gave his parting words to the hall.

It seemed to be the same warnings Dumbledore always gave. Stay away from the forest, don't go swimming too far into the lake. The curfew was at nine o'clock. Things he was used to. It was a relief when he dismissed everyone to their dorms.

Harry stood with the rest, the fifth year prefect girl gathered up the

first years hurrying past the rest of the table. Harry fell into line with them, since he shouldn't know anything about the Slytherin dorms, especially not the specific stretch of wall that it hid behind. But instead of blending in among the much smaller first years, Alphard was right there at his elbow, all smiles and bright eyes.

Merlin, he looked so much like Sirius when he smiled.

"Come along now children!" Alphard sang, his voice easily taking over the other prefect, who, after a brief glare in his direction, realized that Alphard taking over her watch meant she didn't have to coddle the kids, and ran off to be with her friends. Alphard beamed, taking Harry's arm he pulled him to the head of the small queue and began to march him and the first years out of the Hall.

"This way! This way!" His voice rang through the halls as he led them downstairs. "Stick together my little snakes, for if you get left behind you'll never find your way home!" Despite his words, and his carefree nature, Alphard kept shooting surreptitious glances back at the first years. Careful to keep them all in his sight.

Harry smiled softly at that. He had learned a while back that Slytherin indifference was mostly vibrato and posturing. When they stopped in front of the wall, that Harry knew was the doorway, Alphard took the time to look over all the children. Counting them.

"Listen up, little snakes, this part is very important. Our dormitory is hidden behind this wall." He stepped back, flourishing wildly at the blank wall. "It will only reveal itself for the proper password. The password changes every few months, you will be notified when. The password for now is, Viridis!"

On the last word the blank wall melted into a lovely door of carved ebony. Serpents and flowering vines twined their way around the glossy panels, dancing and undulating together in the wavering light of the hall sconces. He watched them closely as they passed through the door, not quite sure if it was a trick of the light that made them appear alive, or magic.

The common room was larger, warmer, than he expected. Being so far down under the ground, under the lake, one would expect damp and dreary. But the light from the two large hearths filled the room with cozy warmth and merry crackling light.

Unlike the common room in Gryffindor that was just one large room that held many functions, there were ornately carved wooden screens

that sectioned off different parts of the room.

There was a proper entryway when they first walked in. Alphard showed them hooks along walls for hanging their cloaks, divided into years with the individual's initials on a little wooden plaque above them. Below the hooks were little shelves for their shoes, each shelf had an accompanying pair of slippers, though Alphard said they were welcome to use their own. All this so that no one would drag wet and dirty cloaks through the halls or track in mud on their shoes.

It was such a baffling, pure-blooded thing to do that Harry couldn't help but laugh softly at the absurdity of. He still took his cloak off and hung it under the hook that read H.E. Following Alphard's lead, he placed his shoes on the shelf and slid the slippers on his stocking feet. He spared a moment of amazement that they fit, but then House Evles were nothing if not efficient.

Off to one side of the great room was the smaller of the two hearths, tucked away behind a few screens with the same snakes and vines as the door. There were several tables of wood, polished to a high sheen and comfortable looking wingbacked chairs all a dark green. Alphard pointed it out as the study area and informed everyone of the room's silencing wards and rules on never speaking above a whisper once inside.

The rest of the room was filled with plush couches and over stuffed chairs in varying shades of green from nearly black to vibrant spring and every shade between. Oil lamps provided a soft, even lighting throughout the large space from their places on the little polished tables that dotted the room. Several large chairs sat grouped together right before the hearth and patterned rugs in silver, green, and black covered the immaculate, dark tiled floors in almost random intervals. But most impressive of all was the wall of solid glass that looked out into the lake.

It took up most of the back wall, the first thing that caught the eye as soon as one was past the entryway. It looked for all the world like a normal window would. Tall, floor to ceiling glass, draped in luxurious velvet of a deep palatial green. The glass was black now, reflecting the pinpricks of light from the room back at them and showing nothing of what was beyond it. But he knew, in the day, it would fill the room with a greenish grey glow of the bottom of the lake.

A shade he was all too familiar with.

Alphard stepped away from their little group for a moment, pattered around on a stand in the corner that Harry hadn't noticed in his awe of the window, when came back he held in his hand a great white serpent. The firelight cast opalescent sparks against the snakes scales as he carried it over to them, smiling from ear to ear as he held his arm out. A few of the first years balked at the snake, unsure about the creature that so many found dark and republish in nature. Harry and the others regarded it with careful interest.

"And this," Alphard said, running a finger over the fine white scales. "Is our Lady Gemma. She's a Lunar Adder, and she's our sweet little girl. Please treat her with respect."

Gemma hissed softly from where she perched wrapped around Alphard's entire arm. "It is I who take care of you, silly child." She gave him a rather exasperated look with her jeweled eyes. Though Harry was sure he was the only one who picked up on it. He was certainly the only one who heard her.

Alphard came to stand next to him again, smiling a knowing smile. "You want to hold her, Harry?"

He had to try, very, very hard to make sure he didn't slip into parsel tongue. English, please, please let him speak English! "Yes, please!" Alphard handed her over, Gemma transferring easily to Harry's much smaller arms. He had neither the bulk nor the length of Alphard's, so she stretched her length all the way down past his elbow and nearly to his shoulder.

He stroked her head gently where it rested on his hand, her eyes like two opals blinked up at him calmly. "She's lovely." He whispered to no one in particular, vaguely aware that Alphard had taken his other arm and lead him to a couch near the fire.

"That she is. Such a lovely Lady." Alphard deposited him on the couch before stepping over to the chairs by the fires, with a flick of his wand one turned around to face the room at large. He took seat and waved a hand at the gathering first years. "Take a seat now, little snakes. We need to have a talk about house rules and then you'll be able to go off to dreamland as to be up bright and early for classes tomorrow!"

The first years piled into the couches, several of them sat very close to Harry, snuggling up to him to get a chance to pet Gemma. He tucked his slippered feet under himself as to make room a few that placed themselves on the rug before his feet.

Alphard spoke, but honestly he didn't listen. He was no first year. He wasn't going to wander off and get lost in the forest, or fall in the lake. Hell, he wouldn't even get lost roaming the castle halls. He knew what it was to be a Hogwarts student, what could Alphard possibly say that would change anything for him?

Instead he focused on Gemma and the few children that had chose to sit near him. If snakes could purr she certainly would be doing so, as not only Harry but the children stroked her delicate scales. Occasionally she'd say something about how she liked a certain spot to rubbed or that one of the children was being a little rough. Harry managed to convey these things to the children while not giving away that he could understand her, or disrupting Alphard's speech.

"There are six prefects to a year, noticeable by the badges," he paused, Harry assumed to point at his badge, though he didn't look up from Gemma. "Any of them will gladly assist you if you have a question or need help. Though they can also punish you if you are acting out, which will not happen, I know. But be aware that they can deduct house points and give detention. So always be on alert."

"Slytherin, and Ravenclaw have only five prefects this, as we are graced with housing the Head Boy. Ravenclaw, the Head Girl. If you can't find a prefect for help you can always ask Tom Riddle here," another pause, "For help. Though please keep in mind that he is very busy as Head Boy, organizing the prefects and helping out the teachers, so only come to him if it's an absolute emergency."

Harry smiled softly as Gemma flopped over, twisting so that her belly was in air and desperately begged for someone to scratch under her chin and rub her belly. Chuckling softly to himself Harry complied. Luckily she was too far gone to question how he knew exactly what she wanted.

Alphard kept talking but something he said kept nagging him. Riddle....Riddle. It was familiar, he tried quickly to place it with some pure-blood face in the future, his mind was a bit hazy from day's events, but still it kept come back.

Riddle.

Tom Riddle....

Tom....

Harry jerked, hand halting on Gemma's warm scales. He did know

that name. Not a pure-blood name. Not a pure-blood name at all. A half-blood. Like him.

So much like him, isn't that what Dumbledore said?

He lifted his eyes, not wanting to see....knowing he had to.

Tom Marvolo Riddle sat in one of the large chairs by the fire! The Dark Lord of his time was just basking in the warmth of a fire, surrounded by helpless children, turning a soft smile and kind eyes their way.

How the hell had Harry missed that a young Voldemort was there? Even for him that was horribly obtuse!

Granted he had tried very to hard to remain unseen, to put on a completely boring front, which had included him keeping his head down and avoided eye contact at all costs. He had made a point of not really looking after all. Had gone out of his way to remain out of the spotlight as the new kid. So...maybe missing him was perhaps not so hard to believe.

Right.

It wasn't his fault.

It wasn't like he knew that Tom Riddle lived in this time....Hermione probably knew....Actually he probably should have known, from the diary...

He was pulled away from his frantic, unhelpful thoughts by a light tapping on his arm. The little girl with glossy black curls, Clara, was looking at him with her deep grey eyes. "Harry," She whispered urgently, trying to keep from disturbing Alphard's speech. "Is she okay? She looks dead!"

Gemma did, in fact, look dead. Her head was tilted precariously to the side, having slid off his hand, and her little tongue was lolling out. What Harry knew and the other's did not was that she was still, from time to time, hissing her deep and utter pleasure.

He gave Clara a gentle smile, rubbing his finger along her long belly. "She's fine, I think she just really like the attention."

A short time later Alphard clapped his hands loudly, drawing every wandering eye back to him. "So, that's about it. The rules are

important, and they're there for your own protection. Now, off to bed with you! You'll meet with our head of house, Professor Slughorn tomorrow morning. He's the potions master and enjoys spending the first night back...um...celebrating the new school year. He'll meet us at breakfast." He pushed out of his chair, motioning for the others to follow.

Harry gathered the now lax Gemma in his arms and went over to him.

"She really likes you." Alphard said, leading Harry over the stand near the hearth. It was a table, about waist high to Alphard and a bit taller for Harry. It was set up like one of the terrariums he had seen at the zoo back in London. With fake limbs and rocks disguised to mimic a snake's natural habitat.

Only the rocks and tree limbs were very real here, the terrarium was filled with little trees that would be the perfect size for Gemma to perch on, there was even a tiny stream that sprang up from one of the rocks to roll merrily over the side of the table. Disappearing into nothing as soon as it fell over the edge. And above it all was a teeny tiny sun, suspended over the trees, shedding warmth and light onto the little grove. Harry smiled brightly when he realized there was also no glass. This might be where Gemma slept, and it was definitely her space. But she could come and go as she pleased.

Harry placed her onto one of the large, flat rocks, the warmth from the stone sinking briefly into his chilled fingers. "I didn't think snakes were one of the approved pets on the list. How do you get around keeping her here?"

Alphard smiled wolfishly. "Loopholes, my dear Evans," He turned Harry with the touch of a hand, leading him to the arched doorway that Harry figured must lead to the dorm rooms. "See, no one actually owns her, she's just here. Just a creature that found her way into the school that happens to like living in our common room." He gave Harry an exaggerated wink as they entered the dim hall.

He didn't have a moment to question, or even to be impressed by the Slytherin's penchant for wiggling around the rules, as the hall, almost literally, took his breath away.

Salazar Slytherin, it seemed, hadn't done things by halves. The entry way and the common room were so much more extravagant than what he was used to with Gryffindor. He didn't know why he had been expecting 'normalcy' in their dorm rooms either.

The hall was separated into two sides. Though separated was a very loose way of describing it. There were a series of carved arches between the two walls, gilded pots of bright, fragrant flowers stood next to each column. The columns themselves seemed to stand between what was the girl and boy sides of the dorms and aside from that there was no separations.

The first doors on either side were thrown open, a prefect stood in the either room, a girl for the girls, a boy for the boys, giving them last minute instructions or help. Harry couldn't imagine which.

The prefects in his own time certainly didn't take such care with the first years. He remembered quite soundly being stranded with just kids his own age to fend with.

"Prefects' rooms are situated between the third and fourth year's rooms. The Head Boy and Head Girl rooms are the ones at the end of the hall, though only Tom's in occupied," Alphard said as he led Harry down to the seventh door of the hall, it was next to the last on this wall, the Head Boy, he noted, would be able to look into the common room from his doorway.

"If you need anything you can come and get me. Anytime, anything, don't worry!" Harry nodded, Alphard opened the door to a very large, circular room, the ceiling was almost completely glass. Like with the window in the common room the lake was black through it, a void through which anything could be looking.

Shuddering, Harry forced his eyes from the vast nothingness to take in his new room. Even here there was odd, unnecessary opulence. The beds were fourposter, just like he was used to, but they looked much larger. Whether because they actually were, or because the dark green bedding simply made them appear so, he wasn't sure.

The beds were lined up against the walls, ten on one side and ten on the other, separated by a door that Alphard said was the washroom. Between each was a large wooden wardrobe, though everyone's trunks still sat at the end of their beds, the rest of his dorm mates were stowing their robes and other assorted garments into the wardrobes.

Alphard slipped off to his own room and Harry made his slow way to the only unoccupied bed, ignoring, for the most part, all his unnamed roommates. There would be plenty of time, once he was rested and a little more settled, to worry about learning names.

One step at a time.

Over the course of the past month certain...things...had appeared in Harry's trunk that he had no memory of placing there. A little kit in a leather case that held a comb, brush, scissors, and other assorted items that Harry didn't know how, or why he would need, had simply been there the day after he went clothes shopping. Then there were several pairs of stockings, both in silk and wool and in a variety of colors. He had been more taken aback by them than he had the slippers. There was no possible way to not feel like he was wearing woman's clothing now...though it had been a chilly day and he had put on a pair of the black silk ones, and they were undeniably comfortable.

Still, he only felt better about them when he saw other's in his dorm placing their own stockings and little grooming cases in their wardrobes.

The past was just plain weird.

And fussy.

Ignoring everything around him, Harry took off his robes, draped them over a hanger in the wardrobe and tucked his little slippers under his bed before crawling under the covers and pulled the curtains around.

It took some time for the room around him to settle down. The thick curtains did quite a lot to dampen the noise to a soft buzz as his roommates chatted through their nightly ablutions. Harry just tried settling into the luxurious warmth of his bed. Fluffing pillows, rearranging them just so to make a nice little nook to curl up in.

Not too long after he was finally settled the wall sconces were extinguished. Plunging the room into sudden darkness that slowly faded into a soft green glow as the waning light from the lake filled the room.

Harry stared into the rippling, gossamer waves above his head, trying vainly to fall asleep.

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Eleven thirty exactly, found Tom in his chair, the largest one in the room, by the fire. All the Slytherin prefects were there as well, seated

in their own armchairs around him. Such after hours meetings were a tradition he had set up in his fifth year, after proving himself as Slytherin's heir he had simply become the head of the house. The older prefects and that year's Head Girl all stepped aside for him to take his rightful place as their leader.

Before his rule Slytherin house only played at unity. Presenting themselves as a whole to the rest of the school, but behind closed doors they were little better than animals. They were a house divided. Children playing at the games their parents thrived on. Petty, useless feuds that served no real, lasting purposes.

Tom had taken them and shaped them into something better. Stronger. Something that would last and serve him well for years to come.

He turned his gaze to Emaleigh Greengrass, the prefect that had been in charge of the first years during the feast. "Tell me about them," he said with quiet command.

Emaleigh flipped a golden curl over her shoulder before starting...she often had trouble begging a conversation without at least touching her hair first. "Everything seems to be fine, for the most part. It's much the same as usual. Most of them already know each other, those who don't are slowly finding their place in the group."

"And the exception?" Tom's eyes narrowed at her, he had a feeling he already knew what she would say.

"There's one child, he doesn't have a name," everyone in the group murmured an understanding. They all knew what that meant. Tom had shown up at eleven and he too did not 'have a name'. It was what they said when a child arrived with a name that sounded far too muggle for comfort.

A pretty way to say a dirty thing.

"How are the other's treating him?"

Emaleigh smoothed out nonexistent wrinkles in her robes, a nervous habit that gave away what she didn't want to say. Tom sighed, the fingers of his right hand began tapping the chair arm in mild anger. It did not go unnoticed among the group. Emaleigh sat straight, nearly tripping over her tongue in her haste to answer him.

No one wanted to see him truly angry.

“They others well...they didn’t want to talk to him much, but I tried to bring him into the conversation, find out about his past. No one said anything slanderous to him, not where I could hear anyway,” she said the last part softly, as though hoping Tom wouldn’t hear that she had been lax in her duty of listening to them. “But his name isn’t muggle,” she added quickly in a stronger voice. “His family is from Russia originally, it’s just an uncommon name here. Aaron Petin.”

Tom was silent for several minutes as he thought, letting them stew for a bit, unsure of what he might have to say about that. “I want you to keep an eye on them, lead them. They need to know how things work around here.”

Emaleigh scoffed, all decorum thrown at the window at being given such a task. “Make Grace do it!” She said vehemently, tossing her head in the direction of the fifth year prefect two seats down. “She likes kids, she’ll want to do it.”

Grace, as though trying to defy the name her parents bestowed on her, was a sturdy girl that nearly reached Tom in height. She was stoic and statuesque with a handsome face and arms that would have no trouble in breaking the much more delicate looking Emaleigh in half.

If the look she sent Emaleigh’s way was any indication she very much wanted to test that theory.

“I shouldn’t get stuck with them just because Emaleigh would rather spend her time in front of the mirror.” Grace shot back, turning in her chair, ready to pounce Emaleigh any second.

“Enough.” Tom’s voice was soft, barely more than a whisper, but it had everyone falling silent and still in a instant. “You will both take turns watching the first years until you are sure they not only find their footing within the school, but also make sure they know that we do not shun our House. A child is a tool waiting to be shaped. If we set them so carelessly aside others will simply pick them up, and use them against us.” He fixed them all in turn with a sharp, unwavering look. “Do I make myself clear?”

A satisfying chorus of ‘Yes, my lord’ met the question. He gave a small smile. “You my go. We’ll have another meeting at the end of the week.”

All of them but Alphard rose and headed towards the dorms. Alphard fiddled idly with the prefect pin on his robes, still uncomfortable with being alone in Tom’s presence. He relief when Orion arrived to sit in

the chair next to him was palpable.

Tom smirked at his delicious discomfort.

Slowly the rest filed in. Orion and Lestrage had been hiding in the study, and Abraxas he was sure had been painstakingly hanging his robes. But one by one his knights found their seats. Rosier had simply been standing in the corner, peering out into pitch black. He took his chair last.

“Tell us about our newest addition to the upper class, Alphard.”

Because he had no sense of propriety, Alphard wiggled in his seat. He would need to get over this unease if he was ever going to be useful to them. “Harry is quiet, his whole family is dead, as far as I can tell. He doesn’t seem to want to talk about it. Um...” Alphard tapped his lips in thought for a moment. “Oh! And he likes snakes!”

There were a few muted groans at Alphard’s less than useful report.

Tom wanted dearly to join them.

“He doesn’t have a name.” Abraxas said matter of factly.

“He doesn’t look muggle-born.” Orion said softly. “He has the bone structure and air of a pure-blood, I can think of a few families he might have branched from.” Several knights nodded in agreement.

“Get close to him Alphard,” Tom instructed, “Learn about him before anyone else does. We need to know how to protect our newest snake. He will already be a target, being a transfer student and all.”

“And because he’s pretty.” Alphard said, nodding himself. It seemed this too was a point that the others agreed on. “We’ll probably have plenty of classes together, I make sure he stays safe.”

“Good,” Tom said resolutely before turning to other topics. It was getting late, and there wasn’t much that needed to be covered. They needed to wrap up this meeting and get ready for the next day.

“Now,” Tom steepled his fingers and peered over them at his followers. “It’s time to get down to today’s business.”



He couldn't sleep. He couldn't even find the space between sleep and being awake. The warm fuzzy, almost, pace that was all darkness and warmth.

It wasn't so much that he couldn't relax. He had become very good at relaxing his muscles and letting his mind drift. Snape would honestly be so proud of him...or well...wouldn't be able to taunt him quite so much. The problem was that he couldn't seem to stay in that state.

It was a slow awakening. Realizing that his eyes were open, that he was staring into the swirling waters over his head. The way it cast ephemeral light on the hanging around him.

Dizzying. Dancing. Dazzling.

The bed was large, the space above his head felt endless. But he still felt...trapped.

Like the weight of the lake was actually pressing down on his chest. Suffocating. Crushing.

Pushing down a wave a nausea, Harry sat up and slid to the end of his bed. Some time ago the door had opened and someone had left the room, only to come back an hour later. He could think of many things someone, or someones, might be doing out in the common room when everyone else was sleeping. Most of which involved a certain Head Boy that, try as he may, kept jumping to the forefront of Harry's mind.

Giving up on sleep Harry crept out of the bed. The room was chilly, though not as cold as he had always figured the dungeon dorms would be. There must have been some magic worked into the floors, as there was no toasty fire roaring in the rooms. Even so it was a little cooler than was comfortable, what with the thin silk of Harry's nightclothes. He wrapped a spare blanket from the bed around his shoulders and left the room as silently as he could.

The common room was dark, but for a few embers still glowing the hearth and Gemma's tiny, brilliant sun. With the room empty it made the furnishing look more like a display of wealth. Like some of those show rooms in aunt Petunia's Better Homes magazines. Something to be seen and definitely not touched.

She would have a cow if she'd known that Harry had his feet on one of these couches just hours ago! He couldn't help but smile at the

thought. But his humor was brief. He hadn't been able to not think of the Dursleys, probably more than ever before. He hadn't even thought this much about them when he went off to Hogwarts the first time.

Now they were there with everyone else, playing on a loop through Harry's head.

He would never see them again. And perhaps it was because he had not chosen this path himself, he couldn't quite figure out what it meant to him to leave his only living blood relative behind without so much as a heads up.

In the silence of the room, Gemma's soft hissing reached him easily. She must have woken up when he entered, now she looked on him with bright eyes that seemed to glow in the light of her little sun.

Her head bobbed around as he approached her, her tongue flicking out carefully to taste him on the air. "What is bothering you, little hatchling?"

Harry smiled at her. She was really such a kind snake. He didn't know how exactly she came to be in this common room, but it was easy to see that viewed the Slytherins as her children. How odd. And endearing.

"I just couldn't sleep." He said, his voice sounding louder than it was in the quiet room. Even for a hiss.

She perked up instantly. "You speak!"

"I do." Harry said back, falling easily into parseltongue. He reached out a hand to her. He didn't have to wait long before she was climbing up on his arm and wrap around it like before.

"I speak all the time, and no one hears." She said, her words taking on a hint of a pout. "Except the other."

Oh right, Riddle would be able to speak to her.

Harry wouldn't know that though.

He went over to one of the chairs by the fire, curling up on the closest to the fading embers. It was still warm from when the fire was stronger. Harry allowed his blanket to pool around his waist to better soak up the remaining heat.

“Someone else talks to you?” Harry asked in the most sincere manner he could. “I’ve never met anyone else who could speak to snakes before.”

“Oh yes!” Gemma said excitedly. “My Tom. Such a good, strong snake.” There was pride in her voice that Harry would have found amusing, if he didn’t know she was talking about the future dark lord.

“The Head Boy.” Harry mused. He spent some time simply stroking Gemma, he didn’t ask what they talked about. He didn’t honestly care.

What would Voldemort say to a small, motherly snake?

Nothing useful surely.

What was useful anymore anyway? What would Harry do with any information that he could get about Riddle now?

Why had that woman thrown him into the past? Into Voldemort’s past?

‘It didn’t have to be this way’ she had said. What exactly did she even mean. Why say that and hand him a locket of Riddle’s parents? For surely that was who they were. He was so much a carbon copy of his muggle father it was almost ridiculous.

Harry bet that fact was something of a giant thorn in Riddle’s side.

Was that why he was comfortable running around as a half snake, half man beast thing in the future?

“What are you thinking so hard about, little hatchling?”

Harry blinked down at her. “Just...mulling over some things.”

“Things I can help you with?” Gemma hissed, gently prodding his cheek with her nose. “I’m good at helping.”

Harry chuckled softly. “I’m sure you are very helpful.” She preened under his praise. Harry sighed, slumping in the chair when his worries came back once more. “I’m just not sure you can help. Or that there’s anything to help with, I guess.”

“Gemma is here to listen, hatchling.”

Harry looked into the embers, faint reds and oranges undulating over pale, ash covered coals. “What if, you suddenly found yourself...lost.”

“Lost?”

“Well, maybe not lost. But everything was suddenly so different, and no one you loved or even knew was there anymore.”

“It does not sound happy, hatchling. What happened to your other snakes?”

“Some died,” Harry said, voice a hoarse whisper. “Some I simply had to leave behind.”

“Gemma is here to look after you now, little snakling.”

“Thank you.” He couldn’t help but laugh at her persistence. Her eyes reflected the dancing light of the low flames, they were almost hypnotic. “What if, hypothetically, you were given a chance to go back. Make some bad things in your life, in the world, better.”

She tilted her head, her eyes wide. “Hypo....tet?”

“Never mind, Gemma. It was just a silly question anyway.”

She booped against his face once more. “But I helped with the other things, yes?”

“Yes, you’re very helpful, Gemma.”

She seemed satisfied with that and was content to settle against Harry’s chest as he watched the fire. He hadn’t realized he dozed off until a sharp nip of pain on his cheek woke him up. He startled, momentarily disorientated. Until he remembered he had returned to Hogwarts, was sorted into Slytherin, and had fallen asleep in the common room.

The room was dark, the only light now the one from Gemma’s stand. “You were sleeping, littlest snake. You need to go to bed.”

She was right. If he was tired enough to actually fall asleep now he should do so in his bed and not scrunched up in a chair where anyone could come by and see him. He rose, stretching his bunched up joints, and took Gemma back to her post. “Good night, snake mother.”

She rubbed against his hand at the name, clearly pleased. “Don’t forget your blanket, little one.”

He fetched his blanket like a good snakling, wrapped it around his shoulders and left for bed. Feeling oddly relaxed and centered.

Who knew talking to snakes could be so rewarding.

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Tom watched his knights go off to bed.

The meeting had been fruitful, though there was little to discuss. No one did anything worth mentioning over the break. No one but Tom, and the story of how his Horcrux came into being was not one that all of his followers would be treated to. Only those closest to him would know any of the details, and even then, they would only know the where and a very general idea on how.

He would not share all of the intimate details with them.

Not with anyone.

The fire burned low, Tom contented himself with watching it dwindle. He was used to staying up late, to working at night. And with his enhanced night vision it seemed a waste to not use it.

But sometimes it was nice to just sit back and allow the world to settle around him. To feel the current of magic as it raced through the halls. Such a different flavor than the magic that hung over the streets of magical London. It was more wild, untamable, eager to learn. Just like the students that fueled it.

He sat there for countless minutes, just feeling. Until Gemma spoke.

“Someone comes.” She stated just before Tom heard soft footfalls coming from down the hall. “It is the new snake.” She said simply with a flick of her tongue.

He didn’t know why he did it. He had no fear or intimidation of the new transfer student. A meek boy who, though lovely, was of no consequence to Tom and his plans. He should be trying to win him over, to make nice and learn the things about him that would either lead to this Harry Evans becoming one of his knights, or simply a member of his house that Tom needed to protect.

Instead to cast hasty concealment over himself with a quick wave of his hand.

Becoming invisible had been something he'd learned long before meeting Dumbledore and coming to Hogwarts. It was always a handy trick to have up one's sleeve.

Harry walked in, wrapped in a blanket from his bed, his little stockinged feet peeping out with every step, and his hair in disarray. He was honestly quite adorable like that, ruffled, blinking curiously at the grant room with his large, acid green eyes.

Tom contemplated getting up and moving into the study. He could pop out and act like he'd been in there all along, he could help Harry with whatever was wrong.

Then Gemma hissed.

Somehow Harry heard her from across the room, he turned and headed straight for the little stand.

Gemma, ever the caring Lady, asked if Harry was okay. Tom couldn't help but enjoy her antics. He had learned long ago that most snakes had a very skewed view of life. Gemma actually thought that the student in Slytherin were her children. There was nothing he could do stop that.

But then Harry answered her, and Tom's world stopped on its axis.

Harry could speak parseltongue!

That was...well it was impossible.

His mind raced, trying frantically to make sense of it all.

He was the heir, just him! He couldn't have a brother...especially a younger one. His mother died when she gave birth to him, she was the one who passed the snake language and the only good part of his heritage to him. There was no way!

And yet he was seeing it for himself, right in front of his face. And coming right towards him!

He had risen when Harry first spoke, and he took a few steps back and away from the chair as Harry and Gemma drew near. She knew Tom was still around, but she didn't give him away. Not even when she told Harry that he too could speak to snakes.

A fact that Harry just adsorbed, as though the idea were a mere

curiosity and not the proclamation of the Heir of Slytherin that it was.

Tom had never been so taken aback in his life. No one had ever been able to surprise him. His life had been a smooth one, for all purposes. Even finding out he was a wizard wasn't shocking. But this! Nothing could have prepared him for a small boy appearing out of the blue who could also talk to snakes.

Tom took a few deep, steady breaths. There was a rational explanation to all of this. Nothing simply was, even in the magical world. There were laws and rules to how things worked.

Tom was the Heir of Slytherin because the Guants were direct descendants of that noble line.

The pure-bloods in his ranks had said it earlier, hadn't they. Harry didn't have a name, but he had a face. Harry Evans simply must come from another family that could also draw its lines back to Slytherin...or some other ancient house that had the talent. There were other, less spectacular cases after all.

After a brief chat about having to leave his friends behind, Harry dozed in the chair. In Tom's chair!

No one ever sat there. Not after he had claimed it years ago, everyone knew better!

Well, Harry wouldn't, would he? He'd have to learn, but that was a lesson for later.

"Wake him, Gemma, it's getting late."

Gemma complied, and Tom watched as Harry placed her on the stand, and dutifully returned to chair to retrieve his blanket. The pale cream of his under robe was almost an exact match for his skin, smooth and pale. He walked with a careful grace, weaving his way through the chairs and tables, slipping a little on the silk covered feet.

Tom couldn't seem to take his eyes off him, and as Harry passed by, still unaware that he was right there, Tom got his second shock of the evening.

They didn't touch, he hardly even felt the breeze left in Harry's wake. But for a moment, a single second as Harry crossed his path and left him behind, the room around him grew brighter.

A shock of light, almost blinding, but it was just the small sun of Gemma's stand. The room grew warmer, the bone deep chill that Tom now carried with him thawed. Just for a moment.

For just a moment, the scent of a meadow, warmed by the summer sun, filled the room.

In a flash, here and gone again, Tom was transported to somewhere....well...magical.

Then Harry was walking away, rounding the corner, and leaving him behind.

Tom gasped, hands reaching, clutching the chair as his knees threatened to give. It was...it couldn't be. But it was...so much like the....

His diary!

His Horcrux.

Harry couldn't have....

It made no sense, but Tom was already off, running through the arch and down the hall. He tore his door open, kicked it closed behind him and with careless flick of his wrist locked it. The diary was in his trunk. There were plenty of wards around it. Things he couldn't stick on his door lest one of the underclassmen wander into his room. But his trunk was his territory alone.

And it was still there. Wrapped in a bit of black silk, tucked into a corner with a camouflaged charm on it.

Tom hugged it to his chest as he sunk to his knees, the room spinning around him. Growing bright, sharper, a little warmer.

Harry hadn't taken it after all...not that he could have....not with the protections on the trunk.

But then how...why had he felt that way before?

It could be another fluctuation, but he hadn't had one of those in over a month. He was well and truly adjusted to his new senses. This shouldn't still be happening.

And oddly of all. Even when his senses were a mess, even now when he held his Horcrux close and soul felt whole once more.

There was never the scent of the sun drenched meadow on a summer's afternoon.

Chapter End Notes

Hello Lovelies!!

This took longer than I thought I would, but then I didn't know it was going to be so long....so so long.

I honestly can't remember if there was anything important I needed to say here....um....I mentioned that I was veering away from canon in parts, this includes Tom working at Borgin and Burke's before graduating.

I won't use the names commonly used for his followers, since we don't know what their names were, and I want to make sure it's known that these are my take on the characters and not something I took from other sources. Abraxas is the same because I feel like we can assume it was him, the other's aren't really known from what I can find.

One of the things I enjoyed about the books was that Harry's year was supposed to be very small to show how many people were lost during the war with Voldemort.

Though there is currently a war going on in this story it's more recent, so the school has more students that it had in Harry's time. So yes, there are 21 sixth year boys, and possibly that many girls as well.

Viridis means a spring green in greek, courtesy of google translate.

I don't really think there's much else to say. If you have questions please comment and I'll try to answer the ones that don't give any plot away.

I wanna thank you guys for your support and love!!! I'm really glad you are all enjoying the story so far!!

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

First week of classes!

Chapter Notes

It's been a million years, and I apologize. Life has been super crazy and I've been very very sick. This is probably not the best edited, and it feels disjointed since I had to work on it here and there over whenever I had time and was well enough, but it's the best we will get as I'm still exhausted and not quite over my sickness.

I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter 4

Harry awoke to the soft pearly green of the morning light through murky water. For several long minutes he simply lay back in the large, warm bed, and watched the lazy undulation of the waves above. The sleepy sounds of his roommates as they awoke was what eventually got him going as well. It was a new day, a new year at Hogwarts. Even Harry himself felt new. No exceptions. No Burdens. He almost didn't know how to handle it.

On the other side of the bed curtains the room was a little cooler, and he was instantly glad he had forgotten to take his stockings off before going to sleep as his feet didn't land directly on the chilled floor. His roommates moved around in a half daze, most seeming to be working on muscle memory alone as they opened wardrobes and shuffled towards the wash room.

He followed a boy with strawberry blond hair into the bathroom, and stopped, staring around agape. Well, really after last night he shouldn't be surprised by how...over the top, everything was here. The Gryffindor bathrooms were simple, utilitarian in nature. There was a wall of stalls for showers, a wall of stalls with toilets, and sinks in between. No fuss, nothing there that didn't need to be. This was....different.

There were shower stalls, but these were bigger, more open. Though the frosted glass of the walls still afforded privacy. Opposite them were large pools cut into the floor, like the bath in the Prefect's bathroom Cedric had him use. These pools were divided by the same glass walls and doors as the showers. There was another door that led into another room full of sinks and stalls with toilets. There were no windows to the lake in either room. Which Harry had to admit was a little comforting.

He shook his head, and set about getting ready. It would take time to get used to all this...but really it wasn't bad. He eyed the baths as he slipped into one of the giant showers, already planning an evening soak.

All of this...well, it wasn't bad at all.

Sometime in the night, perhaps when they were delivering his things to the room, the house elves had affixed the Slytherin crest to his robes. A fine line a silver and green thread wove their way around the hems of his sleeves, collar, and hemline of his robes now. It was a subtle detail, the silver thread gleaming like real metal, the green so bright to be readily noticeable against the black. He liked it. Absently he wondered if there was real gold thread for the Gryffindor robes, if the other two houses also had metallic thread. There was so much new to see here, even when he thought he'd seen it all.

After brushing the hair serum on, and snagging his glasses, wand, and bag, he left the room, lost in a sea of his peers.

There were so many more people here. It was baffling. No year in his time had so many students! But his dorms had never felt too large...not like anything was missing. Did the rooms change to accommodate the number students they were meant to hold? Or just the Gryffindor dorms? He could see Malfoy eating up having all that extra space, for sure.

He shook his head as he followed the crowd to the entry way, exchanged his slippers for his shoes, and headed out the door. He needed to stop analyzing everything, as impossible as it seemed. There were simply going to be questions he'd never get the answers to, and the sooner he made the peace with that the better.

In the Great Hall the table fell into the natural order of sitting with those in your age group. Harry sat down next to Alphard as he had the night before, gaining a large, if sleepy, smile from him. The table was

full of the soft, buzzing, chatter of anticipation. They'd get their schedules soon, and before they knew it they would be off to class. The time before that was liminal, breathless as everyone waited for the change.

A portly man with blond hair and a neat mustache entered the hall, and starting with the head of the table, began passing out slips of paper. He must be their head of house. He seemed jovial, stopping to chat with Tom, who Harry was not surprised to see sat at the apex of the table, before making his slow way down the line.

By the time he reached them Harry could clearly see the effects of the night before on him. His hair was, for the most part smooth, though stray wisps had gotten loose. His eyes, though kind, were red rimmed, and he walked with the air of man who tried very hard to not tip too far over in any one direction. Even if no one had said anything Harry would know the man had been in his cups the night before.

He handed Alphard his schedule with a little pat on the back before reading the next name on his list with squinted eyes. "Oh yes!" he said far louder than necessary, "Harry Evans, there you go, my boy. Can't forget you," he handed Harry the paper, tucking the rest up against his chest as he leaned down to get a better look at his new sixth year, "I say you're already causing quite a stir in the teacher lounge."

Which was the last thing Harry wanted to hear. He wanted to blend in, not stand out for no good reason before people even knew him. That was Harry Potter's life, not his. "Is that so, sir?" He asked tentatively.

Slughorn wasn't fazed by his sour mood, he smiled like it was all great fun. "My, yes! We got your test scores, after all. I do hope you find your schedule challenging enough," someone passed him by on the other side, jostling him in the process. He jumped, blinking around as though just realizing they were still in the Great Hall and he that he had a whole table to deliver to still. "I'll be off then. Do let me know if you need anything, anything at all."

Harry barely got out a, "Yes, sir," before he was bounding off to the rest of the table. He rolled the slip of paper out, smoothing it across his lap to read. It seemed normal to him. He had Charms first thing that day, then Defense, then Divination, and finally ended the day with Potions. He placed it on the table and began to eat once more, unconcerned.

At his elbow Alphard had devoured two servings of eggs and toast and was now pouring over his schedule just as hungrily. "Charms!" he barked out to no one in particular, "I hate Charms. Especially first thing in the morning."

Harry sat his fork down among his half eaten eggs and sausages, choosing instead to drink as much tea as possible. He had Charms with Alphard...he felt he needed all the caffeine he could stomach.

"It really won't be that bad," he tried to reason with Alphard, flashing him a little smile, "It's mostly just memorization."

"Yeah," A boy across from them chirped, he leaned over the table to snag the pitcher of pumpkin juice, "Besides, were learning wordless charms this year. So it's like half the work!"

This didn't seem to make things better in Alphard's mind. His glum mood didn't pick up on their walk to class, nor when they were presented the task of lifting their books without uttering a word. Harry couldn't help but smile fondly at him when Alphard's Charm book scuttled across his desk on his third attempt. He wasn't bad at it, he just didn't like it.

The more he spent with him, the more Alphard reminded him of Sirius.

When the class was over he made towards where the Defense classes were always held in his time, only for Alphard to grab his arm and hold him back.

"Where are you going, Harry? We have History now."

Harry blinked at him for a second before pulling his schedule out. It clearly said Defense. He showed it to Alphard who whipped his out to compare them. "You have Defense now, and History on Fridays? How did you manage that?"

"I...I don't know." Harry took his schedule back, no one had told him about having different classes than his year mates...and of course this made things a little difficult. Harry Potter knew the way to class, Harry Evans didn't. "I...er...I don't know where to go?" He said a little sheepishly.

"Right, right..." Alphard scratched his wild black hair in thought, it had been neat this morning, until he took his Charms frustration out on it. "I'll walk you to class, shall I?" He had a little of his usual fervor

behind his words, but it was clear that he was still reeling from this unseen blow.

Harry walked with him to a class that was all too familiar. Like the room Charms was in, this was the same class he'd been going to since his first year. There wasn't anyone standing outside, or rushing in. It appeared the whole class was already inside, and very full.

"Well...this is it. I um...History is two floors down, third door on the left, if this isn't where you're supposed to be. Just look for the only ghost teacher and a room full of sleeping students."

Harry laughed and thanked him for his help, Alphard seemed like he didn't want to leave Harry there alone, but he had to rush off to class or risk being late. "My cousin would kill me if he found out," he called back in apology before disappearing from sight.

Taking a deep, steadying breath Harry squared his shoulders and marched into the room. It was time to find out what was going on.

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Things would have been a lot better if he hadn't had to start the day with potions.

Oh it wasn't that the subject was difficult in any way. Tom had been cooking since he was small, the matrons of the orphanage were quick to set them to work to keep them busy. He had helped cook, and clean, and mend things. It was not the glowing past he wished to be able to call upon, for the most part he tried desperately to not remember it at all. But skills were skills no matter where or why one acquired them.

The trouble with potions was that the teacher was insufferable and anytime he was around Tom the man seemed to lose all ability to just shut up! Slughorn stood next to his desk the whole class and just chatted. Like they were friends catching up over a long break. And where this would usually fill him with smug glee. That a teacher, even an obnoxious one, understood that Tom was closer to their status than that of his own so called peers. All he wanted to do was focus on what he'd learned the night before.

On the mystery that was Harry Evans.

Who was he? How did he have the talent of the snake language? Where did he come from? The questions burned in the pit of his stomach, stomped through his head, and thanks to Slughorn's big mouth, he couldn't really do anything about them.

When class was over he scooped up his things and marched out with as much dignity as he could muster. Head Boys couldn't allow themselves to wallow, Tom least of all. But he wouldn't find any answers to his question in the next class either. Where Slughorn drowned out his thoughts by being loud and mind numbing, he would be too busy lending a hand in the next class to give into his thoughts as well.

He took his usual seat, laid out his notebook, pen, ink, and book, and waited.

Those around him chattered, as persistent and annoying as nats. Professor Merythought only let in those who passed the O.W.L classes with Outstanding into her N.E.W.T classes. The class would have been incredibly bare if she didn't also schedule it so that all the Houses took it at once. There were just enough students to make the room not feel cavernous. As it was there were more than a few empty seats in the back.

Some said that she set up this arrangement to make the students work harder in sixth year. But Tom had been working with her one on one since his fifth year. He knew she did it because, though she was still spry, she was getting old. Tired. She just didn't have the energy to teach an N.E.W.T level class more than once, or to a whole room of students.

He was probably the only one who knew the arrangement came from need and was not the workings of an evil genius. Keeping her secret safe was just another way that Tom had been working his way into her good graces. She'd be sure to put in a good word for him when she stepped down.

The mindless chatter around him dulled, then stopped. every eye turning to the door. Tom turned as well, expecting Merrythought and her stooped shoulders, in her lace covered robes that she probably bought a hundred years ago.

Instead a small dark figure was lingering in the doorway looking nervous and lost.

After a small pause in which Tom considered all his options, all the possible ways this could go, he said, “Harry?” voice pitched to draw his and everyone else’s attention, but soft enough to be nonthreatening. Bright green eyes locked onto his own, there was something else there, surprise maybe. Tom gave him a soft smile in return. “Are you lost?”

Harry hesitated and Tom took the time to rise and cross the room, “Did you get separated from your class?” he asked when he was close enough, trying to not appear looming against Harry’s smaller stature.

Harry held a crumpled bit of paper in his hands, he twisted it a little as he spoke. “No...I, uh, think I’m in this class.”

At Tom’s raised eyebrow Harry handed him the paper, his schedule, and sure enough there it was, Defense Against the Dark Arts for this slot, no mistaking it. Tom blinked down at him in surprise before a another, more genuine smile curved his lips. “So you are. Come on then, Harry,” he handed the schedule back and motioned for Harry to follow him, “You can sit next to me.”

Harry followed him to the front of the class, taking the empty seat next to Tom. He watched from the corner of his eye as Harry laid out his book, paper and pen in a less tidy fashion than he himself had. Once out, Harry began doodling on a random page of his book, eyes never straying from the page.

There had been too many people between them at breakfast for Tom to really get a good look at Harry in the light of day. He was very much as Tom remembered him from the night before. Small, with eyes a shocking green and jet black hair that only accentuated his fairness. There was nothing that gave away his ability to speak the snake language, nothing that would suggest his placement in a class that should be well above his grade level.

He’d had...unconventional schooling until now, that much was obvious. But there were skills one needed for a N.E.W.T level class. It was hard to imagine Harry had them.

So lost in his thoughts Tom almost missed Merrythoughts arrival. She shuffled down the aisle at her usual pace, swift and hunched. She had probably been quite formidable in her prime.

“Welcome to the N.E.W.T level Defense class,” she said, slightly breathless as she rounded her desk to look at them all, “if you’ve made it this far it means you’re not entirely stupid. Congratulations.”



Stooped though she might be, Merrythought's voice was laced with steel. There was still fire in her eyes, the entire class suddenly focused and alert under her gaze.

"This class specifically relies on nonverbal spells, quick reflexes, and one's ability to think on their feet. For those of you who have had trouble with nonverbals in the past, well, you better sort yourselves out soon because I do not tolerate laziness and whining. If you're capable of magic you are capable of performing it without shouting it. Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Tom smirked as she stared down a few members of the class. People he knew hadn't fared well in some of the spellcraft before. Then her stony gaze landed on Harry, her expression softening. "Except you, of course, Evans. You'll be learning nonverbal spells this year, so you just do what you can when you can." She laughed, "The extra practice will probably put you ahead in your other classes."

Tom chanced a glance at Harry from the corner of his eye. He had a small shy smile on his face, his hands fidgeting with the cuff of his robes. Other than nodding he didn't say anything. All through the class he remained silent, attentive.

The first day wasn't anything especial. Despite Merrythought's words they did no more than review, read, and take down the assignments for next class. If he hadn't already known this was the way all her N.E.W.T classes went he maybe, maybe, would have thought she was taking it easier on them because of their youngest member.

Harry didn't look like the kind to stand up against a strong wind, not to mention be a culpable fighter. Tom also knew he wouldn't be here, in this particular class if he couldn't.

It was time for lunch when the class ended. Harry didn't join the easy chatter that started now the class was over. He didn't offer any sort of conversation at all as he squirreled away his books and papers.

But he did fall into step with Tom and the other Slytherins as they made their way to the Great Hall. He only looked up once when they arrived at their table, meeting Tom's eyes long enough to give a quick and quiet "Thank you." before scurrying off to sit with Alphard and the rest of his year.

Tom took up his place at the head of the table, picking at his food with same feigned interest to used on the chatter around him. His mind was too full. Scattered bits of images and sensations. Dark

hair, jade green eyes, the smell of a sun warmed meadow. Pieces to a puzzle he couldn't quite put together.

Further down the table, half hidden by the bulk of his neighbors, Harry picked at his food with about as much interest as Tom had in his own. Briefly, green eyes lifted to meet his own, as though sensing Tom's gaze.

He wasn't sure about many things. An unusual sensation for him, if not a completely unwelcome one. He was in unknown territory here, he needed to proceed with caution.

There was one thing, though, that he was quite sure of.

He was going to enjoy figuring out the puzzle that was Harry Evans.

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The rest of Harry's week went by in the same organized chaos each new year had presented him with. With the exception of finding himself in an advanced level DADA class, and well, all the changes fifty years can make, like having Dumbledore as a teacher and thus more prominent figure in his life, and not having his friends to confide with about all the strangeness. Things were actually going quite well.

Slughorn was a far more talkative, and warm, potions teacher than Snape. He went out of his way to show Harry the correct way remove the spines from the opuntia fruit, and avoid getting the tiny needles stuck in his fingers. He had stuck around, leaning on Harry's desk, to rattle on about seemingly any random thought that popped in his head. It was largely pointless, though Harry did learn a lot about the migratory patterns of Elf Owls...Even if he couldn't quite remember how that subject had come up.

Things were surprisingly pleasant, normal, even. His fellow Slytherins went out of their way to help him adjust to life there, especially Alphard who was something like an overly excited shadow. Though Harry found his constant chatter somewhat soothing. If Alphard was talking it meant he didn't have to. He didn't have to come up with things to say, or add to conversations he had no interest in. He could just be there, enjoy the company with no pressure on him to be more.

At the end of that first day there were no assignments, no deadlines or demands. He drew himself a hot sandalwood scented bath, took a few relaxing hours to himself courtesy of the bath's heating enchantments, and went to bed early.

By the end of the week he had worked up something of a routine. Wake up, eat what he could, follow his classmates from class to class, and try to blend in. He still received a few curious looks, especially when he was walking to and from DADA with the seventh years, but that was where it stopped. No whispers behind his back. No pointing, No quickly cut off conversations when he entered a room. He didn't delude himself into thinking there was no gossip. He was new and people thought new was excited. So long as everyone one continued to keep their distance, he really couldn't care what they thought of him.

Everything was perfectly normal. All things considered. The little differences were easy to either ignore or adapt to. Some, like being able to soak in a nice hot bath at the end of each day, was actually something of an improvement. By the end of the first week Harry found he was starting to feel...better. His appetite was getting stronger, little by little, even his classes seemed to be going smoothly. And if he still was having trouble sleeping, well, no one could really blame him. At least the bed was comfortable enough the didn't feel too awful in the mornings.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the past, what little he had seen of it so far, was that the Slytherin dorms would so quickly become a place of comfort for him. He enjoyed spending his evenings there. More so he looked forward to it. To the cozy calm of the study area. Or curling up on one of the plush sofas with a book, often with Gemma wrapped around his arm while he read and relaxed. Life as one of the dreaded snakes was easy and peaceful.

He quickly quashed the little voice that said he should feel guilty about that whenever it popped up.

Friday evening fell, Harry had a bag full of homework for the weekend and every intention of finishing up before the night was out. Without his usual distractions such a task didn't seem as impossible as it usually would have. Judging by the sea of down turned heads and the soft scratch of pens against paper that greeted him upon entering the study area, he was not alone in this endeavor.

There were very few seats left in the room, large though it was. He found himself having to take the chair at the end of a table currently

being used by several seventh years. Tom Riddle included.

Riddle was a puzzle that Harry couldn't quite figure out. Dumbledore had once told him that Riddle had been charming as a teen. That people had flocked to him. Trusted him, and even liked him. Harry had always assumed that Riddle, in his time before fully realizing his dark powers, had been more of a bully than the charmer Dumbledore said he was. In his mind Harry had always thought of him as being a more aesthetically appealing version of Dudley. Large, imposing, and brutish. Strong arming to get what he wanted. If not by his own hand, than the hands of those he control through fear.

And maybe he was. Maybe Riddle was simply the best of actors. Showing one face to the room at large and turning into a ruthless bully behind closed doors.

Harry shrugged his shoulders as he laid out his things. Riddle was not his to figure out. He was not at this point Harry's problem, and if Harry was really lucky, he never would be.

So Harry didn't have to wonder why, if he was really cold inside, his dark eyes lit with warmth when he smiled at something one of his friends said. Why, when Harry showed up at outside of his DADA class confused and alone, he looked at Harry with real concern. Took him under his wing, and tried to help him out.

It wasn't even a puzzle he wanted to figure out. He wanted to get his homework done, take a bath, get as much asleep as he could, and sneak out early the next morning before anyone else woke for a day of covert flying with his new broom.

First things first! Transfiguration homework! He ducked his head, and got to work.

He was finished with Transfiguration and had moved onto Charms when he was pulled form his work by a soft, persistent noise he couldn't quite place. It wasn't until there was movement at the head of his table that Harry realized what was going on. A first year at the next table over was crying softly into their book.

And Tom Riddle had risen to tend to them.

Harry watched in horrified fascination as Riddle loomed over the child for sever breathless seconds. Then Riddle fell into a graceful crouch. Fear morphed into numb shock as Riddle spoke in soft tones to the crying child until they looked up at him, and through a bought of

sniffles, told him what was wrong.

There was no yelling. To scolding. No making things worse by telling the child to be quiet so that he and the other's could focus. Riddle stayed by the child's side and helped them through their troubles. When he rose and spoke, it was loud enough that rest of the room could hear.

"If you need more help," He said, mellow voice carrying clearly through the room. "Please don't hesitate to ask me." After the child's softly spoken, "Thank you, Tom," he went back to his seat and took up his pen like nothing out of the ordinary had even happened.

The rest of the room seemed to think that was just a normal occurrence as well. No big deal. That the deadliest dark wizard in history just sitting down on the floor and helping a crying first year with their homework was the most natural thing in the whole world.

Nothing to see here.

Happens every day.

Carry on with your business!

Harry, on the other hand, was having trouble computing all this.

He couldn't recall finishing his work. Or even leaving the study area. A fog had descended over his mind as, for the first time since his...misplacement, the two halves of his life were trying to reconcile with each other.

He made his way toward the fire, scooping up Gemma from where she lay on an empty chair and curled up in it with her in his arms, trying to settle his racing mind.

Tom Riddle, future baby murderer, was...kind...to children.

Dumbledore had said that Riddle had never felt any sort of regard for others. Had said the he was a disturbed child, someone who was very good at making people see what they wanted. So good at deception no one knew they were being played until it was too late. He didn't make friends, he sculpted followers.

But then, hadn't Harry had always thought that about Draco and his crew? The way he was able to wrap teachers around his fingers, how he was able to schmooze others in their year when Harry knew he was

anything but affable and sincere. Draco might have been a scumbag, but he was hands down a better person than Voldemort. And Harry knew for a fact that Draco, even in his quest to win every teacher to his side, would never put up with a first year sniffing over their homework.

There was a soft pressure against his nose that pulled Harry, blinking, from his thoughts. Sometime in his musings Gemma had slithered up his chest and was now poking at him at random, her tongue slithering out as though to taste that he was still alive. He couldn't help the smile that curved his lips at her behavior. Unable to assure her that he was fine with words, he ran a finger over her silky scales instead.

He huffed out a soft sigh as Gemma snuggled into his arms to receive more pets. Trying to untangle the mind of a young Voldemort was certainly not something Harry needed to get lost in. It wasn't his to even worry about....yet. Not for some time to come. Not until he was ready to lift the lid on that particular can of worm and peer in the abyss.

Not today, certainly.

Harry let his eyes fall closed as he snuggled further into the large chair, the same one he'd rested in before when he couldn't sleep. He listened to the active common room around him. To the groups that took advantage of the cozy warmth of the room same as he. Some chatted softly with their friends, and few sprawled over the large couches to read, others sat in groups to play or observe several games of wizarding chess.

The nose was nice. Comforting. Somehow a reassurance. No matter the distance, the time, the hardships, there was always light and laughter in the world. The silver lining to the stormy grey clouds. Humans would always love, and hope, and live, even in the shadow of despair.

Under the murky, cold lake, in the middle of the den of serpents, Harry found himself surrounded by warmth, light, and comfort. Falling asleep among them. A soft smile on his face.

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He was sleeping in Tom's chair.

For several long seconds all Tom could do was stare. Several pairs of wary eyes kept flicking to their direction, probably just as shocked and put out as he was. Tom was a calm, pleasant person. He was helpful and kind, and never, ever, lost his control in front of others. Never blew up when there was a problem. Never lost his cool.

Everyone knew that was Tom's chair. No one had ever contested it when he had taken to sitting there. It was simply known that it was his favorite spot. His alone. He had never even contemplated what he might do if ever he found someone else there.

His knights would be expecting him to make some sort of show, some dominance play that was skillfully crafted so that everyone walked away happy and Tom got his way. That was how he worked. Like in the beginning of fifth year when Langly tried to claim the bed nearest to the door. It had always been Tom's preference to station himself before the door, so as to keep tabs on who came in and out of the rooms where he rested. It had simply taken a few sternly spoken words and a little nudge of wandless magic from Tom, and Langly happily accepted the other bed.

Tom should walk up to Harry, wake him, and inform him that he was napping in Tom's chair.

That's what he would have done...and yet.

With a little sigh Tom instead went to another of the chairs around the fire and settled in it as though it were the most comfortable thing in the room. No matter that it felt off. The arms were shorter, the back too fluffy and the seat just a hair too springing to be truly comfortable. But he leaned back as though it were his own chair, elbows resting on the arms, hand steepled before him in thought.

He eyes though, kept drifting from the gentle dancing flames to watch Harry in his slumber. He was curled into the chair, looking for all the world like it was just as comfortable as a laying in a bed. Somehow he had managed to get all his limbs onto the seat without any parts hanging off, but then, he was quite small....He was curled up like a little kitten....or a coiled snake. Gemma had wound herself around one of his arms, her little pointed head resting on his cheek, his hands pillowed under his head.

It was...sweet.

“Curious, isn’t he?”

Tom’s gaze snapped to the voice beside him, he had known someone had followed him from the study, just not which of his Knights it had been. Abraxas stretched his long legs out towards the fire, his pale eyes sharp on Tom before flicking towards Harry with a narrowed glare.

Tom’s mouth twisted into a grimace, Abraxas’ ire was hardly called for. “He is,” Tom said firmly, staring Abraxas down until he was forced to lower his gaze. “He is an unknown, gifted enough to be moved up in his studies.” Something even Tom had never managed to accomplish, not that he had ever tried. It was simply not something that was done as far as he knew.

“So,” Abraxas began, his voice not nearly as strong as before. “Do you mean to...bring him into the fold?”

Tom leaned back in his too soft chair, unable to keep his gaze from falling back to Harry. There was so much that he didn’t know about this Harry Evans. What side of the war his family had been on. Why he only now was getting a formal education in magic. How it was he could converse with snakes, something that only a few families had ever passed on, most of which had died out ages ago.

“Well see.” Tom said after a moment’s pause.

There was so much about Harry Evans that Tom wanted to keep an eye on.

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The morning dawned. Not bright and cheery, as Harry might have once wanted, but muted and calm, which someone felt better. It didn’t stop him from feeling oddly chipper as he threw the blankets off and bounded out of bed. It was finally the weekend! Harry had nothing demanding his attention, his homework was done, there was no Quiddich practice or detentions or anything.

He would not focus on how there was also no one waiting for him. Not today. He was determined to have an enjoyable day. Just him, his broom, and the sun soaked ground around the castle.

He rushed through his morning ablutions, grabbing the first casual robe within reach, and after shrinking his broom down to fit into his pocket, bounded out of the room just short of a run.

The halls were chilled, and silent. Harry was probably the first one up and moving this early on. Even so he was happy to leave the more commonly used routes behind, turning up a steep staircase that would take him far away from the Great Hall.

Years of studying the Marauder's Map was finally paying off. And Ron thought there was no point in pouring over every nook and cranny of the thing on slow nights. See Ron, sometimes you don't have access to the map and still need to know your way through the back passages of the dungeons!

Hazy grey light spilled from the open archway he's been heading for, causing Harry's heart to jump joyfully at the prospect of freedom it promised. Until the sounds from the archway broke through the rapid beat of his heart. He stood in the archway shivering in the chill, damp air, rain falling down around him in thick sheets.

Of course. There was only a handful of weeks before the chill of fall really set in, so of course it storms on his first day to really go out and enjoy some potential warmth and sunshine. Just perfect.

Even knowing he couldn't possibly fly in that mess, or well, rather knowing he didn't want to try, it was still with great reluctance that he pried himself from the cold brick of the archway to walk a listless, destinationless path back inside.

There wasn't anywhere he really wanted to be besides out there in the fresh air. He wasn't particularly hungry, especially with the disappointment now weighing him down. He could go back to the common room. It was at least warm there. He could curl up with Gemma by the fire...but he really wanted to stretch out a little. Feel the wind in his hair for a just a few hours.

A desolate huff left his lungs as he trudged on, walking blindly up a staircase just because it had appeared before him. Harry probably knew these halls better than anyone currently alive. The Map was sheer genius and never ceased to amaze him. He, Ron, and Hermione were inventive in their own right, precocious when needed, but he doubted they would have ever come up with the idea of magically mapping the whole school on their own.

It would be nice to have it now. If only for sentimental reasons. In fact

it was luckier that it was still in future. It was useful there, where real danger still lurked. Harry wasn't going to run into a Death Eater in this time. He didn't need to be on constant edge any more.

Several floors up and a few twisted corridors later, and Harry found himself leaning against the sill of an open window. The air was still a bit too cool to be truly comfortable. Though it was soothing to the slight ache that had started just behind his eyes. Maybe he should go back down to the common room. His trek through the castle may have been a disappointing one, but it still counted as stretching his legs.

He took a few more moments to really take in the view. The dark, uneven outline of the forest, just visible through the ever shifting haze of rainfall. The grounds were just as lovely as ever, emerald green and rolling. The weather was too bleak for anyone or anything to be out and about. He found the stillness calming rather than depressing, his need for the wind and warmth of the sun was still there, it was just easier to contain upon reflection.

Movement caught his eye as Harry turned to leave. Several figures stood in one of the archways along the corridor, their presence masked by the constant pitter patter of the rain. Harry figured he must be between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw towers. There were plenty of routes, both main halls and back passageways, between the different common rooms. This particular hall was a meet up spot even in his time, it wasn't surprising to find it was just as busy now.

Harry blushed slightly as four sets of eyes fell on him. He hadn't meant to intrude on anyone's gathering. Only one of the students was wearing a school robe, Ravenclaw, the other's wore casual robes like Harry's, though bulkier and more harshly cut than his own, giving the four young men a rather uninviting air. It was still odd to not see muggle clothing anywhere. He had at least expected to see muggleborns wear their street clothes on the weekends, but he supposed they learned quickly to blend in as much as possible.

It would change eventually, yet Harry still felt bad that muggleborns would have to suppress such an important part of themselves to fit in in this time.

Harry cast the group a small smile, ducked his head in a show that he was friendly and meant no harm for intruding, and turned to head back down the way he had come. Maybe he would go to the Great Hall. Grab a cup of tea and a scone before finding something to occupy himself with in the common room. A genuine smile curved his

lips as he contemplated spending all day in the bath.

“And where are you going, Snake?”

Harry's shoulder's sank as the deep voice rang throughout the hall. House rivalry was always going to be a thing, he had just hoped to be able to avoid it in this era. No Quiddich. No 'Boy-Who-Lived'. Nothing to set him apart from the others as a target for his house. But no. It seemed a lone, known, Slytherin in what the Ravenclaw and Griffendor's probably saw as their territory was enough to spur on feelings of ill will.

Harry didn't turn around.

They moved towards him. Out of sync, heavy footfalls that were probably meant to be intimidating, but just made Harry give a tired sigh. This was really going to cut into his bathing time. He had started looking forward to trying out the pale blue bubbles. He wasn't sure what they smelled like exactly, but he had seen someone fill their own bath with them the other day and they bounced around in a most entertaining way.

When the footfalls drew nearer Harry turned to face them, it took every fiber of his self restrain to not roll his eyes at the over the top show of strength that was going on before him. They were all taller than him, of course. Taller, broader, and meaner looking. It was clear from the twisted smirks on their faces that they thought Harry an easy target. Internally Harry just sighed.

Whether it was the 1950s or the 1990s, bullies were all the same. There was a time when such odds would have caused Harry to panic. A time when he would have turned and ran. But Harry wasn't a helpless child anymore. He had stood up to far scarier, and more powerful, wizards than these.

Tedious though this encounter was sure to be, Harry couldn't help the little smirk that curved his lips. They were not going to find the easy target in him that he they hoped.

Harry James Potter had no fear for school yard punks.

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Weekends were a busy time for Tom.

There were no schedules. No one but the Prefects and Head Boy and Girl to stand up and take control of the writhing, screaming masses that was the student body. He didn't have to worry too much about his own house, thankfully. Though that hardly meant his weekends were peaceful.

He woke before the others. Groomed and dressed for the day in impeccable and well tailored robes the drew the eye to his impressive height and build. It was easier now to acquire casual robes. In his earlier years he had needed to re-purpose his old school robes into something resembling what wizarding children would wear at home.

If any remember a time when Tom Riddle was not the prime example of wizard kind they were smart enough to not say it.

Tom left his room at an unhurried pace. The dorm was silent still, though here and there the sound of running taps and the snap of doors could be heard as the rest of the dorm began to stir.

The rest of the school might not have a schedule, but Tom sure did. The first thing he did was check and make sure all was well within the common room. It was a silly little ritual, he knew. There was no way in without the password, and no reason for one of his own to leave the room in ruins. But seeing everything just as it should be, with Gemma happily curled around a branch dozing lazily under her created sun, caused something warm to stir within in his chest. It always did.

From there he would go to the Great Hall. He was always one of the firsts to arrive, often getting there before anyone at the staff table deigned to show up. The professor's were perhaps the worse of the group when it came to slacking off on the weekends. Tom on the other hand arrived early, he stayed late, and then spent the rest of his days walking between the library and the courtyards making sure the peace was kept.

At the door Tom exchanged his slipper for his normal shoes and tossed his cloak over his broad shoulders. He had developed a weather charm in his second year after many mornings of frustration at not knowing what the day would be like. There were some draw backs to living under a lake.

Tom expected to make his slow ascent to the main floor and then to the Great Hall like he usually did. It would be the only time during the day there wasn't bound to be someone calling his name and asking

for his help with something. He took this time to reflect and collect his thoughts. To bask in the ever shifting waves of raw magic that billowed through the halls like perfumed smoke. Not everyone could sense it, which truly was a shame. It never ceased to bring Tom peace. Whenever, of course, he was able to focus on it.

Which did not seem to be that morning. As the door to the common room closed behind him, Tom had just enough time to see the hem of a white silk robe disappear around a corner. In the opposite direction of a the Great Hall.

With a sigh Tom said goodbye to his leisure morning walk, taking out a small book from his pocket he jotted down a quick note, tore it from the book and sent it flying with the flick of his wand. Abraxas and the rest of his knights would soon know to speed up their own morning rituals to take over for Tom in the Great Hall, and with that taken care of he could see who was skulking around his territory.

He rounded the corner only to catch, yet again, a glimpse of white silk and nothing more as whoever it was raced up the stairs. Tom followed on silent feet. Always just a few steps too short to really see who it was. They were fast, he'd give them that. Fast and light on their feet. Despite himself, Tom smiled. A little chase before allowing his wrath to fall on this supposed trouble maker. Maybe the good start to his morning wasn't lost after all.

He realized his little sneak was headed for one of the exits just off the dungeons and smirked to himself with dark glee. They wouldn't be going far there. His charm had informed him of a rather severe storm brewing.

Sure enough his target had stopped dead at the archway, peering out into the storm. Tom's dark humor slid away as he realized who it was. Not a sneak from another house, but Harry Evans. New and unused to the way the school worked. Alone, racing through the halls even though he knew Harry had heard the beginning of year talk that the Slytherin Prefects always gave the underclassmen.

He would have gone and scolded Harry for so brazenly breaking the rules. But something in the set of his thin shoulders had Tom standing back. Harry was...sad...How odd that he knew that. Just by looking at him. Oh Tom was good at reading people. He'd needed to be in order to survive in both the muggle and wizarding worlds. Usually though he would need to be closer, speak with someone, watch them a little. Harry's sadness though, it emanated from him. Suffused the air. So

strong Tom nearly felt it as his own.

When Harry moved Tom decided to follow. He cast a quick disillusionment on himself just encase Harry turned around. He wasn't sure why, but he wanted to follow. To make sure Harry was...safe. Silly as that sounded, it had quickly become a compulsion that Tom couldn't ignore. Blending in with the shadows, Tom followed Harry's trek through the twisting halls on silent feet.

Harry's path had little to no direction to it that Tom could see. He went up flights of stairs at random, turned down halls and through passageways that simply lead in circles and then ended up staring out a window that he just seemed to pick for no other reason than that it was open and there. Tom stayed back to watch it all. Close enough to just keep Harry in his sight, not too keen on letting him know that he was being watched.

When Harry turned around from the window his shoulders were a little more squared, his delicate features no longer compressed into a deep frown. He seemed lighter, as though he had come to some internal conclusion and was all the better for it. It lifted a weight in his own chest as well, though Tom hardly had time to think on it. Harry hadn't taken more than a handful of steps when a voice broke the calm around them.

Solomon Prewett was the epitome of a Gryffindor. He was loud, boisterous, and crude. There wasn't a fight between the houses that didn't start or end with Prewett. Afterwards he always used 'Gryffindor Bravery' as a scapegoat for getting out of trouble. The fact that always seemed to work was just another reason Dumbledore didn't need to be such a lofty position as he was. Tom might not actually care if students wanted to beat or blast each other to a pulp, but he at least pretended to. Always there to stand up and put a stop to it when things got out of hand.

Harry had stopped walking and four figures approached him from around a bend where they had been out of Tom's line of sight. He wasn't surprised to see Weasley, Longbottom, and the Ravenclaw mub-blood tailing Prewett like the dogs they were. They all played for their house's respective Quiddich teams. Beaters and Keepers. Each over a head taller and several stones heavier than their prey.

Harry looked like a child beside them. Like a little doll, easily broken. To Tom's horror he did not seem to understand the danger he had put himself in by sticking around. He couldn't know who these four were.

That Tom had patched up more Hufflepuffs and young Slytherins who had crossed the path of these four than he ever cared to think on. Harry couldn't know the fight that would ensue.

Tom wasn't frightened at that. His hands shook in anger as he reached for his wand.

Anger, and not terror.

Because that was just silly. Tom didn't feel fear. Not anymore. Not for a long time now.

As they drew closer to Harry Tom moved from the shadows. He was too far away to hear the words spoken. What had seemed an appropriate distance to give Harry privacy was now a curse as he sped up the final flight of steps toward them. He wouldn't be able to make it before something broke out, but he would be damned if he didn't put a stop to it before they hurt another of his snakes.

He was still pathetically shy of the landing when the tableau before him broke. Harry said something in response to Prewett that had him turning red faced with anger. Prewett and his crew all reached for their wands at the same time, there was a series of flashing lights, the scent of acrid smoke, and by the time Tom was clear of the stairs four figures sprawled, groaning on the floor. And standing before them, serene, poised, wand held loosely in one slender hand, was Harry.

Tom recovered as quickly as he could, taking in Harry's now sheepish expression as he tucked his wand back into the soft silk of his robes and the four menaces as they finally began to pry themselves from the floor.

"What," he said in his best no-nonsense voice, "Is going on here?"

"He attacked us!" The Ravenclaw spat, wiping a small drop of blood from his mouth.

"I did not!" Harry's voice was strong and sure. His fists coming up to rest on his hips in indignation.

Tom of course knew that Harry hadn't been the one to start this, he ignored the mud-blood altogether, focusing back on Prewett. "Decided to take out your aggression on a lone student, again, Prewett?"

"You heard, Clayton. Your dirty little snake attacked us." Prewett's gaze lingered on Harry, something dark in their depth that spoke of

more than anger.

Tom wanted to smash his face in.

"It was shield," Harry said, drawing Tom out of his violent musings, "I simply turned their spells back on them." Harry cocked his head, a little smirk on his lips, "You could test my wand if you don't believe me."

Tom gave him a reassuring smile. He knew the spell Harry probably used. It was a little longer than the common shield charm, where the spells were simply dissolved on contact. This one rebounded the magic back to the caster. It took a little longer to cast, most people didn't feel the pay off was worth it. Harry must have really good reflexes to have cast it so quickly.

"That won't be necessary, Harry." Tom turned back to the others, they were now all on their feet, no lingering damage done. At least they hadn't been attempting to maim Harry. "You four will go to the Headmaster's office and wait for me there."

"You can't give me order's, Riddle, I'm a Prefect!" Prewett face was red once more, nothing but loathing showing in his deep set eyes for Tom.

"And I'm Head Boy," Tom said with a smug grin. He took the little book back out of his pocket, jotted down a note to the Headmaster, ripped it out and sent it off with a flick of his wand. "I suggest you get going, you don't want that to reach him too long before you show up."

Simmering anger rolled off them in waves, but they left with nothing more than a few muttered curses and narrowed eyes. As much as Tom didn't want to deal with Dippet this early on a Saturday, it would at least get some results. The protocol for these things was to take them to their Head of House, but Tom knew that Dumbledore would just pull whatever strings he wanted and Prewett and his gang would be out terrorizing the halls with nothing more than a smack of their hands.

And Tom was quite frankly getting tired of cleaning up after them.

Once they were gone Tom turned back to Harry. He stood back, hands tucked into the pockets of his robes, and when he looked up at Tom with his large green eyes, Tom's will power almost faltered. There was still something hooded within them. A tension in Harry's shoulders and furrow to his brow that spoke of the sadness Tom had seen before.



He had to take a deep breath before going on.

“Harry, you know you shouldn’t wandering around on your own.”

This did not seem to be what Harry was expecting him to say. His brows shot up in surprise as he gaped at Tom. “What!?”

“Our house has very specific rules, Harry, which you were made aware of. Due to the hostility that is often unduly given to our house no one leaves the dorms without a partner to accompany them.”

Harry sputtered, his hands raising in indignation as he gestured towards Tom. “You were alone!”

“I am Head Boy,” Oh, he was so much more than that. Only the very stupid went up against Tom.

Harry’s shoulders, his entire being seemed to deflate in an instant. As though his anger and indignation had burned out so quickly. “I just...I wanted to spend sometime outside...But..”

Ah, but the storm. That was why Harry had been sad. Why he looked so down now. Again there was something that throbbed within Tom. An echo of sadness he couldn’t quite place. Suddenly Tom wanted nothing more than to take away the shadow from Harry’s wane face. To ease whatever pain he must be feeling.

The storm wasn’t letting up though and he had a meeting with Dippet to get to. There was only one solution that Tom could think of and before he knew it had a hand on Harry’s shoulder, leading down down the stairs.

“Come on, I...I want to show you something.”

Harry’s shoulder was tense beneath his hand and he could feel the chill of his skin under the thin silk. But he made no complaint of the cold or Tom’s presence as they walked. Simply shooting Tom uneasy looks here and there.

As before when he had been this close to Harry, the world around time grew more focused. Crisper, warmer, brighter. He couldn’t understand it. Couldn’t quite place the odd sense of peace at the contact. Tom had never heard of something like this. It felt like the Horcrux, but it simply couldn’t be related. He had already read everything there was on the subject and nothing had ever mentioned something like this. As pleasant as the sensation was, he knew it

would lead to nothing more than a few sleepless nights spend in the library.

But for now.

Tom stopped before a blank stretch of wall, instructed Harry to stand still for a bit as he passed before it three times. He was positive he was the only student who knew about this room. At the very least he was certain he was the only one who knew exactly the what the room was capable of. Magic was quite amazing really. It was a shame so many people limited themselves with such petty and mundane pursuits when magic could give them the world.

Tom looked back at a now bewildered Harry, pride filling his chest as reached for the handle of the door that had simply appeared out of nowhere.

“No one else knows about this room,” Tom confided with a bright smile, “You have to keep it a secret.”

Harry nodded, eyes wide as the door swung open. And perhaps for the first time in his life Tom held his breath in the anticipation of actually making someone else happy.

~~~

The sky was falling. The walls shrinking down to crush him into nothing. The air was suddenly too thick to breathe. Harry knew he was panicking, but there was nothing he could do about it!

Tom Riddle had lead him to the Room of Requirements. He had concocted a room to show Harry with the explicit warning to tell no one. Harry’s world shrunk to a pinprick, past and present blending into one.

Tom smiled at him just like he had in the dairy. All easy confidence and charm. The door swung open, and everything slowed.

Harry was back in the Chamber of Secrets. He could smell the damp and mold. Feel the chill water seeping into his shoes and clothes. Fear clenching his heart at the ominous slithering, hissed words of torture and death. A horribly cruel Tom Riddle stood over the body of his best

friend's sister were she lay, unnaturally pale and still.

His arm burned with agonizing bite of phantom fangs.

Whatever this young, cunning, form of Voldemort wanted to show him he knew, without a doubt, he did not want to see it. All his bravery from before was suddenly gone, washed away completely once he realized there was no way out from under Tom's eye without being suspicious. The door opened, and Harry clutched his hands to his chest, breath held, waiting for the horror that was sure to come.

Only to blink in dumb confusion.

This was.

...What the hell was this?

Harry took a few hesitant steps, past a beaming Tom Riddle where he held the door open and into...

Into a sunny meadow.

The room was warm and bright. The scent of summer flowers heavy in the air. There was even a gentle breeze, and the soft sound of birdsong. It was...Magical.

He had no idea the Room of Requirements could even be used in this way.

The sound of the door closing drew his attention. Tom had followed him in, the door fitting into the scene perfectly as part of a tall garden wall. "Well," Tom said, voice softer than before, almost shy, "What do you think?"

What did he think? What did he think! Harry couldn't even scrape enough brain cells together to form a proper thought let alone actually answer him. Tom seemed to sense his struggle, taking pity on Harry, Tom pressed a hand to his shoulder until they were both moving further into the room turned meadow.

"This room can turn into anything you want, or need. You simply have to keep you desires in the front of you mind when you pass before the wall."

Harry nodded along as though this was new to him. Mystified that Tom had actually made something so outstanding. He didn't need to

feign his amazement. If it had just been a lounge, or a dungeon as he had feared before, then he would have had some trouble acting surprised.

But this!

“It feels so real.” He was finally able to say, a little blue butterfly flapped around his head for a turn before landing softly on his shoulder.

“It is real,” Tom said simply, “So long it stays in the room.”

Harry shook his head in disbelief. It was hard to imagine all the ways they could have been using the room in the past, all the many things he could have imagined it to be and what had they done? A sparing room. A cozy place to sit and talk....what a waste.

Harry stopped before a tall, sprawling, rose bush. Each bloom was impossibly perfect, outstandingly fragrant, and each and everyone a different color. Peaches, reds, yellows, even blues and violets. Carefully he cupped one of the heavy blooms in his hand, fingers brushing gently over soft velvet petals of a violet rose.

“I need to go,” Tom said into the silence. He stood back a few paces from Harry, simply watching him take it all in. “You can stay here for as long as you like,” he paused for a second, thoughtful, “I’ll send Alphard here in an hour to check on you. Don’t leave without him, understand?”

Harry blinked up at him for several long seconds, unsure he was hearing correctly. Tom wasn’t staying. He expected Harry to stay here, in the sunny meadow that Tom himself had created.

That Tom had created for him.

Just for Harry to enjoy. Not to gloat in the glow of his own magnificent prowess. But because what....because he thought Harry would like it? And he did. It had been exactly what he had wanted. He hadn’t even asked for it and Tom had made this...for him.

“Harry?”

Oh right, he had asked a question. “Yeah,” Harry said quickly, turning his slightly burning eye away from Tom to focus on the flowers. The last thing he wanted was to get emotional in front of Tom! And all because he had shown Harry some kindness without question, without

being asked, and without asking anything in turn. Very few people in his life had ever done such a thing for him.

The fact that Voldemort of all people would simply spring this on him was enough that, if he hadn't been so in control of himself, Harry probably would have fallen into hysterics.

"Good." Tom said with a curt nod, turning on his heel he left without another word. Harry watched his swift departure with a new eye. The Tom in the diary had been cunning and cruel. Leading peopling into traps only to clamp down on them with iron jaws once their guards were down. Willing and even eager to kill to get what he wanted.

Voldemort, from what he'd seen with his own eyes and what had been gleamed from those that had known him, had given up the game of bait and switch long ago. He simply took what he wanted. Destroyed those in his way. And ruled without a care to the well being of those under him.

Which he saw as literally everyone.

This Tom...was not that man.

Yet?

Had something happened to change things? To change him? What sort of things had to happen to turn someone into a mass murder? Harry bit into his lip painfully, Tom was not his problem. He was not a puzzle Harry needed, or wanted, to figure out.

He cast his gaze up, up, up to the bright sun, to puffy clouds rolling lazily on the breeze. He put Tom and the encounter in the hall behind him. What did it matter in the long run really? He had better things to be doing with his time.

Harry allowed a smile to bloom on his face. Taking out his broom he unshrunk it and climbed on. There was only thing that he needed answers to right now. And it was quite simple.

How far up did the magical ceiling actually go?

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back lovelies!!

I'm sorry again for the delay. There have been like a million

things going on for me, good things, frustrating things, and then of course getting sick...and then not being able to kick said sickness.... Things have not settled down yet. I'm still not fully well, even after two round of antibiotics. So I can't, and won't, promise a quick update. I can promise that even if it takes a while, this story will have a conclusion!! I don't actually expect it to take long...I say that after releasing a 10k+ chapter, I know. But I have the story plotted out in my head and it won't be too long.

I've read plenty of time travel AUs that follow a similar path to this one. Sometimes, after I had started this story, I would come across one that almost matched perfected in some spots to what I wanted to happen. I know that mine is unique in other ways and I'm still certain that y'all will like it.

Most of these stories have a moment where Harry is confronted with bullies from this era, and most of the time Tom comes to the rescue.

Well...I think we forget that Harry has pretty quick reflexes and knows his way around a spell or two. So I hope you enjoyed No Nonsense Harry standing up for himself.

I usually like to talk a little more at the end of the chapters, but I'm truly exhausted. I'm going to leave it at this. Feel free to ask me questions if you have them...I will try my very hardest to answer them when my energy levels go back up.

Thank you guys so much for you support of this story. I'm really that so many of you have enjoyed the first few chapters. The parts I'm really looking forward to are coming up! I can't wait to share them with you.

NEXT TIME!!

Tom starts to unravel the mystery that is Harry Evans

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 5

Harry's day was, for lack of a better word, perfect.

The morning passed easily with lazy loops around enchanted trees as Harry explored the room. It went on for quite some distance, appearing even larger than when they had brought the DA's practice room into existence. The little enchanted butterflies weren't the only animals around either, there were squirrels in a myriad of shades and sizes, and even a blue faun with bright pink spots.

He spent some time stretched across his broom on his back, simply floating on the magical breeze while cloud gazing. It was exactly what he had wanted. Better even, since he didn't need to fear prying eyes or bad weather.

When lunch rolled around Alphard did in fact come to check on him, but instead of trying to lure Harry out of the enchanted room and down to the Great Hall, Alphard had packed them up a lunch of sandwiches, fruit, and a bottle of pumpkin juice. After a hasty lunch he pulled out his own broom and the two of them passed the afternoon chasing after magical butterflies and a few crab apples that Alphard enchanted to fly like snitches.

They decided to go down for dinner, Alphard's ease with conversation pulling in those around them. For the first time since arriving Harry actually joined in on the dinner conversation, mostly just talk of what everyone had done that day, Alphard quickly coming up with a story of showing Harry around the castle, and getting lost in a few abandoned rooms in the east wing. Harry had only nodded along. Of course Alphard knew that Tom had made the room, it seemed that the Room of Requirements was a secret to most of the House, but not to everyone.

The air around them was light, carefree. Alphard kept up his playful banter with those of their year all the way back to the dorms, where Harry excused himself from their company, to a few mild protests and

a pout from Alphard. But Harry had had enough of socializing for the day.

He spent the rest of the evening soaking in one of the giant baths, large blue bubbled bouncing around him happily. They smelled like fresh blueberries and marshmallows and they didn't lose their size or bounce until they were sucked down the drain hours later.

Yes, the day had turned out to be absolutely perfect.

And if Harry was still sleeping fitfully, if he still found himself waking in the night without remembering when his eyes had even opened. Well, then, at least it all comes with peace of mind. A feeling a safety. It's not so bad, spending the nights mostly awake. Not when he doesn't have to fear what might be lurking in the dark.

Besides, it'll get better in time.

He's sure it will.

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Tom Marvolo Riddle had taken complete and utter control over every aspect of his life by the age of twelve. Though he only had the observations of his peers and the memoirs of other powerful wizards to go by, but Tom was rather certain he was the only person in history to have achieved such a fete at such a young age.

So why, by Merlin's Mangy Beard, could he not sleep!

Tom had conquered sleep years ago. The senseless fears of a scared and lonely child had melted quickly upon discovering magic. Once he'd known that mastery over his person was an attainable goal, he had dedicated himself to it and won. All he needed to do was lie down, close his eyes, and sleep came to him. Dreamless sleep. Sleep that was over in the blink of an eye. It was bad enough that Tom's body needed to rest so for long on a daily basis, he could at least make it seem as though it passed quickly.

Even after completing the Horcrux ritual he was still in complete control of body and thus his sleep. Things had only begun to change when he'd returned to Hogwarts. It was ridiculous to blame it on



Harry...who looked as though he'd rather spend his days having tea with woodland fairies than causing anyone trouble. Yet he couldn't ignore that this all began after he came into Tom's life.

He had brushed off that first night, thinking that finding Harry speaking with Gemma, and the subsequent scare that his book had been stolen, had simply shaken him enough that his relaxation techniques had failed.

Then it happened again the next night, and the next. For the rest of the week Tom had found himself unable to actually rest. He closed his eyes, relaxed his body and mind, and....nothing.

By Sunday morning it was starting to get old. He had things to do. Meetings to plan, a whole castle full of students to watch after, and a long standing appointment with Merrythought to help with her class planning that, and every, Sunday and Wednesday evening. He couldn't afford to be lack witted due to something that should have never been an issue to begin with.

There was no wayward new student to chase through the halls that morning, so, for a time, things fell back to being normal. He was mostly finished with a light breakfast of toast, jam, and tea by the time the first few students shuffled their way into the Great Hall. It was easy to spot the muggleborns from the half and pure bloods, those that had to wear their school robes on the weekend to fit in, or even worst, the few idiots who wore muggle clothes the first few weekends before they realized how much scorn the other's were sending their way for it.

Tom gave them all the same kind, protective smile as they filed in. Hogwarts politics, no, the unfair politics of the wizarding world in general might treat them differently, looking down their old, pure blood noses at them as they tried to navigate life outside of the school. But they would always remember that Tom Riddle had been nice to them. Had always had a smile and a helping hand when needed.

Students came and went in waves during the weekends, even Tom couldn't keep track of everyone. He did his best to look over the crowd as a whole, and once he had finished his own mean, lend his attentions to any problem that may arise. So he did not see when Harry and Alphard had entered the Hall, but he couldn't look away once his eyes had found them.

Alphard was bright and bubbly as per usual. He bounced in his seat,

waving wildly with his cutlery, Orion must have left already as there was no way he would let his cousin get away with such a base act. Whatever Alphard was saying was lost in the chaos of the Great Hall, though the blank stares of his those around said it was probably just another wild dream he'd had and was, for some reason, obliged to retell it in painstaking detail.

Beside him Harry yawned into his fist. His eyes were hazy behind his golden frames and he seemed unable to focus on the toast before him, let alone on Alphard's rapid fire story. Harry looked as tired as Tom felt, though he at least was able to appear composed in the face of it. Tom had better control over his body than that.

When the last of the students had cleared out and the tables were magiced clean once more, Tom began his rounds of the halls. The storm from the day before had blown itself out, allowing the sun to come out for the day. It did not mean that the halls were empty, but there were fewer students lingering within them than there had been the day before.

He divided his time between the library and the courtyards, staying in one place only long enough to make sure everything was going smoothly before heading on. His Knights were around to keep the peace alongside the Prefects, between the two groups he had a veritable army at his back. It made it easier, though no less boring, to do his devoir.

At one point he spotted Alphard and Harry racing through one of the archways to the fields below, brooms slung over their shoulders and smiles on their faces. Tom caught Orion and Abraxes watching them from a bench carved into the stone by the archway.

"Alphard knows we have a meeting later, doesn't he?" Neither of them startled at Tom's voice, Abraxas had probably sensed his approach. Orion didn't let things frighten him that easily.

"I told him," Orion didn't take his eyes from the pair as they raced down to the edge of the forest. "He assures me he'll be there on time."

Abraxas didn't say anything, yet he too kept his eyes fixed on Alphard and Harry, or more likely, just Harry. He was a strange puzzle that Abraxas wanted to figure out. The thought of him doing so sent something dark slithering down Tom's spine. There was something about Harry that was starting to set Tom, not on edge exactly, but something that made him feel more alert. Something about Harry that

made him...care.

He could think of no other way to describe the pull, the drive to felt around Harry, to make him a safe haven to spend a day in...to even show him that room in the first place.

Tom shook himself slightly and went back inside. He had an hour before the meeting, he could make several more rounds of the castle in that time.

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The warmth was amazing.

It wasn't just the sun, though being able to fly under bright rays, racing through real wind, with the scent of real, wet earth beneath him. Not that Tom's magical meadow hadn't been a fantastic retreat. It was just that the real thing was always going to be better.

The sunny green field was peppered with happy students, some stretched on blankets to soak up the sun, others, like Harry and Alphard, flew around on brooms or played games with enchanted balls, trying to enjoy the day to its fullest. Laughter drifted on the breeze, reflected in Alphard's smiling face. Everything about the day, that moment in particular, warmed a part of him that Harry hadn't noticed had gone cold.

The past had been a cold and stormy place so far and he was just realizing, with sun and wind on his face, that it wasn't just the gloomy weather.

Some part of him was still on that chilly beach, some part that kept thinking he would just open his eyes and be back there, alone and cold on his birthday. It had made accepting his place in the past easier. Why shouldn't he be content to float along if he was just going to wake up.

It was this moment, with laughter, and sunshine, and Alphard falling off his broom after trying to do a complicated flip, landing himself rump first onto a third year girl's open book, that caused Harry to realize he'd only been half awake this whole time. It was Harry toppling off his own broom from laughter as the third year girl

pummeled an already bruised Alphard with her book, that solidified Harry's resolve.

He wasn't simply going to exist in the past. So long as he was there, Harry was going to live.

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"It's old, that's really all I know," Orion always spoke in the same, monotonous way. Right to the point, eternally stern. It was good for getting the basic information from him. But it made for a boring conversation. "My father seems to think that it is quite dark, though."

"Old and dark are not the same thing," Abraxas chimed in, and soon the rest were putting in their two sickles as well.

They met every week in the library. It was a time that those who were not in their house, but still one of Tom's Knights, could come and converse as a group. He had learned a charm, found it and tweaked it, some time ago, so that any who drew near the table only heard what Tom wanted them to. They said they were a study group, today they were 'studying' Charms.

To everyone at the table, however, they were talking about family treasures and soul separations.

Outside the sun was bright, a warm and fragrant breeze blew in through the window, carrying the faint sound of laughter with it. Tom didn't realize that the table had fallen silent, not until the focus of everyone was on him.

He turned away from the window. "What is it?"

"Is everything alright, my lord?" Collins was a Ravenclaw, but his loyalty had always been absolute. He was one of Tom's best information seekers and like the other Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs in the group, helped solidify Tom's persona of a man of the people.

"Of course." Tom started, instantly aggrieved that his followers were acting out, until he took in the rest of the table, all the matching looks of worry for either him or themselves, should his mood prove volatile.

“You do seem distracted,” Avery said at his side. Of everyone there only he would feel confident enough to push any boundary Tom might have.

“I’m fine. Please, Orion, continue.” Tom said, placing his hands firmly on the worn wood of the table. Orion looked around nervously before picking up his tale about an old book his father was trying to buy, he claimed it was a memoir of an old and powerful Dark Wizard that had been stricken from history. Tom found this suspect for many reasons, not least of all that Light Wizards’ were always so eager to talk about their accomplishments. Anyone who could have taken down the a Dark Wizard never passed up the chance to brag about it endlessly. If there were no accounts of his downfall, of his reign, then he couldn’t have been that powerful of a wizard.

That did not mean he was not interested in reading this book. Only that he doubted it was anything special.

Orion’s amelodic voice droned on, and when Tom blinked and saw trees and sun once more even he had to admit his mind was wandering. He rubbed absently at his chest, at a pressure there he couldn’t quite identify. It had begun about half an before and as he sat there it only seemed to grow. Not unpleasant just...odd.

Someone walked through the barrier of his spell, it rippled across his skin as it was triggered. The table fell silent as the spell chimed, alerting everyone that someone outside of their group was approaching, but it was only Alphard. He rushed up to the table, completely out of breath and looking as though he’d been through a tornado.

“Sorry, sorry,” he gasped, hunching over he pressed his hands to table to steady himself and catch his breath. “Sorry, I lost time.”

“Just sit!” Orion growled, gripping Alphard’s robes and pulling him into a seat. The only time there was any spunk to Orion’s voice was when he was dealing with his wayward cousin.

“I am sorry,” Alphard said, he was still a bit out of breath. “Harry and I were flying and then I fell, and had to fight off a hoard of third years!”

“Save it for later,” Abraxas said in his bored, imperious way. “We have a meeting to see to.”

But Tom was more interested in Alphard’s talks about flying and

fighting children than Orion's droning about books. As casually as he could he cast his gaze around them trying to see if Harry was around as well, though he couldn't be invited to the table, Tom just wanted to see him.

He shook himself from that thought. Tom had never wanted anyone, he'd never longed for anyone's attention or company. Only their respect.

Orion opened his mouth to speak about that damned book once again, Tom cut him off. "Let's hear from someone else, shall we. Avery, your aunt has something you think will be of interest?" Avery's aunt worked with Grindelwald, she had all the best news from the front lines. Usually anything he had to say on that particular topic was something that could draw him in with ease.

Tom's gaze kept drifting back to the window, back to the sun and laughter. He ended up calling the meeting short, unable to give even Avery his attention. First meetings were more of a formality anyway, he needed to take note of who showed up and how eager they were to take up their position as a Knight, see if anyone had any recruits in mind. All of which had been accomplished, which made the meeting a success, even with Tom's personal failings.

It was probably just lack of sleep. That would explain why his emotions had started to run away with him. It wasn't even that bad, really. Just a little distracting. All throughout dinner he kept focusing down the table, not realizing that he was watching Harry and Alphard until several minutes of doing so. This new...lightness, to his emotions was doing some interesting things to his outlook. The air around the table was strangely effervescent, there seemed to be a bit more laughter and light. Even Harry smiled and talked with budding animation to those around him. The pale green silk of his robes brought out the brightness of his eyes, and even though they still looked tired, he appeared livelier than he had since Tom had known him.

He shook himself again, there was conversation around him, hesitant along with worrying looks from his Knights, which he soundly ignored to focus on his plate for the rest of dinner. He was fine. It was nothing that some sleep wouldn't help.

Sunday evenings he went straight to the DADA room to help Professor Merrythought with her lesson plans. After two years of helping her he could do the work himself...in his sleep...she hadn't changed the

curriculum much in that time, and any improvements were usually of Tom's own doing.

For the whole time he was in the classroom he felt almost normal again. The fuzzy pressure behind his breast bone was less pressing, and his mind a little clearer. The room was back to its usual dark quality as the sun quickly set. It was the most clearheaded he'd felt since waking. He chose to stay a bit to late to work on the mounds of files that Merrythought never threw out, and only minimally kept in order, so it was already quite late when he arrived back to the Slytherin common room.

It was mostly empty, only few stragglers who were trying to wrap up last minute assignments before their morning classes were in still milling about. He would need to have a talk with his Prefects about making sure this didn't become a recurring event. He wouldn't tolerate his House falling behind.

Most of the rooms to the dorms were snugly closed and the denizens within presumably sleeping soundly. There were ways, of course, to see if everyone was following the rules regarding bedtime per age group, but it was a time consuming ritual that would need to be applied to each bed in the dorms, and Tom honestly didn't care that much. So long as everyone was up on time it was hardly his problem if they chose to stay up late.

The Prefect rooms were still opened, they wouldn't close their doors until everyone else was in their room. Tom peeked inside the boy's room when he passed, they were a step above the normal rooms with larger beds that had sturdy partitions between them for privacy. The Head Boy room was a step above even that, the bed was much larger, the giant wooden frame and accompanying furniture sported wondrous carvings much like the ones on the dormitory door. Besides the furniture and the absolute privacy, his room was much like the others. The ceiling was a large window to the lake above, his bath was larger than he needed, and he had a small sofa and chair for lounging.

Such opulence could easily become common place when one was exposed to it for so long, and going on seven years many would assume that Tom had begun to taking it for granted.

But he would never forget the orphanage, as much as he wanted to. He would never forget what it was like having to fight over blankets and clothes. Even his flat in Diagon Alley was far more modest than anything Hogwarts chose to the throw at its students.

Tom closed the door behind him, setting his personal wards against it with a lazy wave of his hand. The room was absolutely silent, warm from whatever charms were set in the floors and walls to keep the chill at bay, it felt massive as he stood there alone.

He went about his nightly routine as usual, taking care in his grooming and the setting out of his clothes for easy access in the morning. He pulled back the duvet, stretched out in the middle of the bed, extinguished the lights with a thought, and cleared his mind.

It had been years since he needed to actively meditate to fall asleep, since he'd needed any help centering himself for rest or magical purposes at all, but the techniques came back to him instantly. Deep even breathes, relaxing each part of his body one molecule at a time until he was weightless and free.

Once he was centered he allowed his mind to drift. There was nothing else he needed to accomplish in this mediation other than falling asleep, though such deep states of relaxation were excellent for self healing and walking the Astral plane.

It was difficult to tell time when mediating. The seconds sped up and slowed down without his control, so he could not be sure when exactly he became aware that he was still awake, only that he had been floating in nothing for a while without actually falling asleep.

There was something else there. The thing that he been nagging at him all day. It had been subtle before, a fuzzy warmth that had brightened his mood and the day around him. He had known of its presence as one might take notice of a particularly vibrant flower or chattering bird, it had been enough that he took note, but not persistent enough to draw his full attention.

It was still there, this fuzzy, rumbling, something that poked and peeled at his senses, only now it was different. Instead of filling him with warmth and happiness it now itched, chaffing at his nerves in a way that didn't require his immediate attention, but was undoubtedly the thing keeping him awake.

Now that he was alone in his own mind, the distractions of life faded away to nothing, allowing him to find this source of distraction, he couldn't turn away from it.

He swept his awareness over his physical form, still stretched out on his large bed. He wasn't ill or injured, there was nothing physically wrong with him at all, which meant turning his third eye inside



himself. Meditation wasn't an absence of emotion, it simply put enough distance between his mind and his body that emotions were slow to reach him. So he was only mildly irritated rather than furious at having to do such an examination on himself.

It took him a moment to find the thing, it was little and not actually a part of him so much as something hanging onto him from afar. He followed this entity, this little bit of...something, that was clinging to his essence. His soul. At least now he understood why he'd had such trouble finding it before, it felt very similar to his own soul, disturbingly so. Was it a lingering piece of the Horcrux? Some bit that had managed to hang onto him and not go fully into the book? He had never read that such a thing could happen, but there was so much that wasn't written about the making and maintaining of Horcruxes that he couldn't be positive that wasn't it.

As he followed this gossamer thread it grew larger, brighter. The emotions pouring from it also became clearer, they were agitated, angry and sad all in one. At the end of the thread was a...well a blob. It was the only way he could think to describe it. Nothing else around him held any substance, he could only sense himself and whatever, or whoever, this was. He wasn't even sure he was on the Astral plane anymore and not somewhere entirely different.

There was nothing else, just him and this bright blob that felt so familiar. It reacted to Tom's presence, growing brighter and warmer as he drew near, pulsing sadly as he pulled away. He couldn't say what he was doing, maybe he was discovering a new form of magic, some sort of soul magic maybe. He pressed his consciousness against this other entity, it was soft and warm, he sank into it like a heated bath, or caring embrace. For a second, or an eternity, he was surrounded by bright light and the scent of a sun drenched meadow in spring, then...

He was on a beach.

The sun was low, just a glimmer on the horizon, everything was grey and washed out. Tom began to walk down the shore, cold wet sand squished beneath his feet, between his bare toes as the wind nipped his nightshirt around his knees. After a quick thought he was dressed properly in casual black robes and shoes. He smirked to himself as he made his way down the deserted beach. This was a dream. Not one of his, but a dream all the same. It was as easy to manipulate as his own had been.

Tom walked on, and as in the way of dreams, one second he was alone

on the empty stretch of sand and the next he was not. Further down the beach there was a figure, clothed in dull black, crouching in the sand.

He was only a little surprised to see that the figure was Harry when he was closer. Who else could pull him from sleep into their own dreams than the boy that had plagued his waking thoughts as well?

Tom watched Harry paw around in the sand for a few minutes before kneeling down to his level. The movement catching Harry's attention, he looked up with pained green eyes, not at all surprised to see Tom there, and said. "I can't find it!" His voice was hoarse, the wind had tugged his hair into a mess of curls. The robes he wore were threadbare, frayed and ripped.

"Find what, Harry?" Tom asked, there was no point in looking around for whatever it was. This was a dream, quite possibly Harry's nightmare, whatever he was looking for would not appear.

"The locket. She gave it to me...it sent me here. If I find it..." Harry had begun sifting through the sand once more in his panic.

Tom took one of Harry's hands, brought it to his chest and met Harry's gaze, steady and calm. "This is a dream, Harry." He squeezed Harry's hand, it was small and frozen to the touch, coarse sand gritted against his soft skin. "Just a dream, it isn't real."

"A..dream...?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"That's right," Tom smiled and took control of the dream, the world, around them. The sun rose, golden and bright, thick springy grass rose from the sand all around them, the ocean became a gentle, winding stream, and trees and flower sprung from the ground. The air filled with the sweet fragrance of roses and birdsong. "See?"

Harry gasped, looking around them in wonder, "It's like...like before, when you." He turned back to Tom, his eyes bright. He hadn't taken his hand back. "Are you real?" Harry's hair was still wild, his dull torn robes so outstandingly out of place now that they were off that dreadful beach.

Tom smiled down at him, holding his hands so they warmed up in his own. "Of course I am," he laughed softly at Harry inquisitive look, "You were keeping me awake."

"But how...why?"

"I don't know," Tom took hold of the dream world once more, and now they were sitting on a thick quilt with a several cushions nearby if they wanted them. "We can figure it out later, yes? It isn't important right now."

"...I suppose..." Harry shifted on the quilt, his hands finally falling out of Tom's as he moved to a more comfortable position.

Tom would not mourn the loss of delicate hands in his own, instead he followed Harry's lead, taking a few of the cushions to prop up against as he leaned back to watch the sky above. "Get some rest, Harry, we can figure this out in the morning."

When there was no reply Tom looked back, Harry had fallen into the pile of cushions and was fast asleep, slowly his robes faded from dusty black to a glowing crimson, the stress that always hung around him smoothed out. In his sleep Harry looked peaceful. Safe and content.

Tom wasn't sure if one could dream within a dream, but he would be there for Harry if he needed him. Tom was tired as well, but his body was resting soundly in its room. Whether he allowed a dream to take him or chose to fall into the void like usual, he would wake well rested in the morning.

They both would.

And if Tom chose to remain cognizant, to stay up and watch Harry rest instead getting the night over with as quickly as possible, well, it wasn't as though anyone else needed to know.

## Chapter End Notes

Hello Lovelies!

I know it's been a billion years, but things are very crazy and stressful right now. So I'm sorry for the wait, and sorry that this is a bit shorter than I usually put out...it felt so much longer since I've been working on it for so long, but sometimes scenes turn out shorter once they're written out so, what are you gonna do?

When I sat down to write out the...dreaming part, I realized what I needed to do...I did not come up with the concept of this sort of dream walking scenario. Robert Jordan has to take credit for that. (The Wheel of Time is being made into a TV series, already granted a second season even though the first one isn't out yet, so I encourage you to start reading the books now if you haven't

already and are interested in a fantasy, sorta scifi, series that I feel is, hands down, better than Game of Thrones, (A Song of Ice and Fire))

We'll get Harry's POV of the dream and after in the next chapter. I just really wanted to wrap this up and that was a good stopping point. So any questions you have about his dream and why he's having it will be answered.

I don't expect this to be too long of a story, it's probably almost halfway over...give or take a little. Everything is planned out it just needs to get written, so I've already started thinking of the future. So many of you were excited about the ABO aspect of this story, which is my usual jam, I mostly write ABO and went light here as I didn't know the current thoughts on ABO in the HP fandom. BUT if it's something you are interested in, a future HP story from me that is ABO let me know! I have my own version of omegaverse I've been crafting for years, so if you are interested in seeing what it is, you can read my other ABO [Works](#) The world building in Hidden is the one I would use for any new ABO stories.

So be thinking of what you might want. I want to write what you want to read. What are some HP ABO scenarios you'd like to see?

## DISCORD!

I wanted to extend some invites to Discord groups I'm part of. I mod for a Rare Pairs chat, The Rare Pairs Harbor. Basically it's a place where you can go and talk about your obsession with less popular ships. It's multi/all fandoms, We have HP, Voltron, Yuri on Ice, Supernatural, BNHA, and are willing to add any fandom that you might want. So if you and your friends want to go yell about your rare ships in an understanding environment, and you are 18 yrs or older, drop [Diamond](#) a message with your info and she'll give you a link. You can say I sent you (^\_<)~☆

We also have an Omegaverse Chat, multi fandom, Death Note, Yuri on Ice, BNHA, but all you need to join is have an appreciation of ABO and be 18 yrs old or over (you can talk about any fandom you want as well). You can ask [Diamond](#) for a link there too if you want.

My last group is for a very small fandom, The Realm of the Elderlings by Robin Hobb. It's my favorite book series, if you haven't read it and want to have your heart ripped out and read some of the best fantasy ever, and don't mind reading 16 books (it

also has, dragons, lgbtqia characters, magic, the gay people who take care of dragons, more dragons, being able to talk to animals, intrigue, the strongest female characters you'll ever see, my favorite character ever The Fool, and so so much more!), I can't recommend it enough. If by some chance you have read it and want to join the fun! Just let me know in the comments and I'll get you a link. There is no age restriction for the group, you just need to have read, or be reading, the books.

Whelp, I guess that's it for now...I'm going to try to get to some of the comments in my inbox...there are over a THOUSAND somehow. So I'm sorry if yours haven't been answered...ever...my attempts at getting through them never seem to go as planned...But they mean so much to me! Especially now with stresscity going on here. I'm so happy that you guys are still reading and enjoying this story!! Thank you so much for your support!!

and now

NEXT TIME!

Harry and Tom bonding time!!

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## Chapter 6

He was warm. Floating in it. Surrounded by it. Warm, relaxed, and calm. He couldn't remember the last time he felt so at peace.

Come to think of it...he had never felt such a sense of well being before.

Harry rested in a place of soft dreams. He could think of no other way to describe them. They weren't quite right, almost not there. Fuzzy impressions of his friends, of the times they had spent together. Eating ice cream on hot days. Playing impromptu games of Quiddich. They were easy and ephemeral. Flowing one into the next, leaving him feeling happy and complete.

It went on and on, until a hand rested on his shoulder, pulling him from their muzzy hold.

"Harry." The voice was soft, deep. Familiar. Though it took him a moment to realize who.

"Tom?" Harry blinked up into bright umber eyes, golden from the hint of sunrise. "Wh-where..." They were in a forest, resting on a pile of pillows and blanket by a stream. The sun appeared to be just rising. How long had they been there? Why was it so warm, so quiet?

Tom smiled, taking Harry's elbow, he helped him sit up. "This is a dream, Harry. Don't you remember?"

Yes...now that Tom said it, he did. "I was having a bad dream," Tom nodded, "you showed up and changed it."

"It's time to wake up, now." Tom said instead of commenting on his swooping into Harry dream to turn it upside down. As though that were normal for him. He just smiled, leaned back and said "Wake up." With such command that Harry did, in fact, wake up.

He blinked up at the windowed ceiling. Fish scuttled over his head, not a soul moved around the room. Harry sat up, crawling to the end of his bed he pushed the curtain back just enough to see the clock across the room. It was early still, though if he were an early riser he might wake at such a time.

Was it real? Was Tom awake now too. He probably did rise at this hour...it was madness, but Harry could envision it so.

He let the curtain fall back into place and slumped back into the covers. Tom Riddle had come to his aid. Again. It was one thing to step in and help someone with a quick fix, like he had with the Room of Requirements. It was another to follow someone into a dream to alleviate their distress.

Harry had a connection with Voldemort. He may want to deny it, but after everything with the Department of Mysteries, the months of shared dreams, of Voldemort's emotions leaking into him, he couldn't. He had thought, though, that such a thing would not follow him to the past. He had been here a while now and nothing that Tom felt or did reached him. They hadn't shared dreams before. There wasn't an exchange of emotions....right?

Harry rolled over, burying his face into his pillow. He couldn't figure this out...he had no explanation for the connection before falling into the past, he certainly didn't have one now. But it was easier to focus on that than to remember that Tom had seen one of his nightmares...what had the dream even been about? He could only remember the beach, the sense of panic. It was still mortifying to have been caught in such a state from someone so...so Tom!

Someone rose from across the room, yawned loudly and headed for the bathroom. The rest of the room would begin to rouse too. He might as well get up now since he was already awake.

Tom's shoes were gone from the rack when Harry slipped on his own. He probably got up early so that he was the first one to leave. If there was one thing that could be said about Tom Riddle, as Harry was learning, it was that he took his role as Head Boy very seriously.

The crowd in the Great Hall continued to throw Harry. Every time he entered to see the milling masses, having to weave and push his way to his table, he was struck again by how vastly different this point in time was. He fell onto the bench next to Alphard with a relieved sigh. A quick glance down the table showed him Tom, in conversation with

a girl in Ravenclaw colors. Harry hurriedly turned away.

Good. It was good he was busy. It meant Harry didn't have to worry about whether he should get up to go ask him about the dream. It was probably nothing anyway. What would he even say? Oh hey, Tom, did you happen to walk into my dream last night? No? Well okay then, please don't think I'm crazy!

Harry quickly scooped...something, into his plate and put the dream out of his mind.

Everything went as it should after that. Which wasn't hard to believe. This was the past, not Harry's strange little pocket of Hogwarts. Where something as big as sharing a dream with Voldemort meant he needed to rush off to Dumbledore, or someone, and find help for some poor soul who was about to be murdered.

In the past, it seemed, sharing dreams with Tom Riddle just meant he got the best night's sleep in literal months.

It was a crazy, messed up world....and Harry should just enjoy it.

Tom was never alone that day, Harry couldn't help but notice. Tom was tall, and while Harry was shorter than normal, it was easy enough to pick Tom out of a crowd...so long as Harry wasn't stuck within it.

So he stood in the doorways. He climbed on top of the benches in the courtyards. He peered down the table at lunch and dinner. Each and every time Tom was entranced in, no, he was entrancing another, in deep conversation.

Even in the common room Tom was never not busy. He helped people with homework as he worked on his own. When that was finished he held some sort of court by the fire. Harry would have gone over and asked him if they could speak, but when he got near enough to their chairs that his destination was obvious, Abraxas Maloy stared him down as though wishing he could set Harry aflame with thought alone.

So he had thought better of it. It was nothing, it had to be nothing. Tom hardly looked his way all day, and if one happened to wander into the dream of another, surely they would want to ask that person about it.

So it didn't happen.



Harry went to sleep as he normally did. Or well, he tried to go sleep as he normally did. He tossed and turned and dug his way so deeply in his covers it was a wonder he hadn't managed to fall inside the mattress. Suddenly he was oddly energetic. Nervous. It fizzed down his nerves.

What if it happened again?

What if it wasn't Tom doing anything, or their connection, or whatever it was? What if it was just Harry, having odd and incredibly comforting dreams about Tom Riddle.

Would that be worse? Better?

He was so sure that sleep would not come. How could it? He was too worked up trying to figure out what it could mean if Tom Riddle featured in his dreams all on his own.

Then he blinked....closed his eyes for a second and a sensation, warm and dizzying came over him. When he opened them he was back in the forest. Back on the pallet of blankets and pillows. Bubbling stream flowing slowly before him, the soft twitter of birdsong. A warm fragrant breeze rippled his hair, tugged insistently on his robes. They were a lovely jade green, he noted...Harry didn't have robes this color.

"Hello, Harry."

He whipped out around, in his body, in his real body, it probably would have hurt. In a dream, it was just a quick thought and then he was looking at Tom.

He sat where he had the night before, his pile of pillows smaller than Harry's. The golden sun, either setting or rising, he couldn't tell, limned Tom's face perfectly. As though it had only risen at all to highlight his pleasing features.

"Tom?"

Tom just smiled.

"This is a dream," Harry said, a lot more certain this time. "I'm dreaming...of you for some reason."

Tom gasped, a hand pressed to his chest. "I'm wounded."

Harry humored Dream Tom with a little laugh. He stared out at the

stream. "I've never dreamed of this place before, so why would I now? Two nights in a row...and why would Tom be here?"

"Because I like it here, and it's my dream, Harry. I'm just letting you in it."

Harry goggled at his smug, stupid face. "Your dream?" Letting him? Letting him! As though Harry had asked. He snapped his mouth shut when he realized it was open. "How...why?"

The how, really, was more important than the why in Harry's opinion. He could understand the why....sorta. Tom Riddle wanted to control the things around. It helped him to look good. Made sure he was always cast in the best light.

Literally!

Tom leaned back on his pillow and sighed, his gaze finally moving from Harry to the stream. "I really wish I knew."

"To which?"

"Pardon?" He tilted his head to Harry. Lazy, and at odds with his Head Boy persona.

"You know which, how or why?"

"Both, I suppose."

He didn't sound like this bothered him in the slightest. Harry sat up, looking down at him for a change. "You just wander into people's dreams and don't ask questions?"

"This is my dream, Harry."

"That's not an answer." Harry demanded, though he was oddly hopeful. Maybe it was just something that Voldemort could do. Dream walk. It wasn't anything special about Harry after all.

Tom sighed. "I don't know why I ended up in your dream yesterday, but I think it ended up being for the better, yes?"

"So, you really saw it?" Harry deflated a little.

"The beach, yes..." Tom was back to giving him a very sturdy and inquisitive look. "I didn't recognize it."

"It isn't important....why are you smiling?"

"Because you've never spoken this much to me before." Tom's smile was lovely, especially in the soft golden light. "You always seem so skittish when I'm around. Except that one time," Some impossible way Tom's smile became brighter, "When you were angry you shone, you were fearless."

Harry huffed, turning away from him. He didn't want to have any of these conversations with Tom. "So, what. Do you just swoop in when people are having nightmares to give them good dreams?"

"I told you, Harry, I didn't mean to end up in your dream. I've never done this before..."

Harry's heart swooped down into his stomach. Well, shit...he was rather counting on that...

"Why, has this ever happened to you before?" Tom sounded as though he were just curious, his facial features still showed mild interest and good will.

Harry couldn't believe that was it.

Images raced before his eyes faster than he could control them. A giant snake, lashing out and biting, again and again. Screams and blue light. The same twisted hall. Mr Weasley falling from that chair.

"No." It sounded like the truth. The bitter taste of the lie stuck to his tongue.

Tom hummed and turned back to the stream.

Silence fell between them...Tom seemed at his leisure but Harry was more on edge than ever. Would it be rude to ask to leave? It probably would be...though for the life him he wasn't sure what the hell he was supposed to do here. How had he been so at ease the night before.

Oh, right. Because hadn't known it was real!

"You can sleep, you know."

Harry jumped at Tom's sudden voice, he'd forgotten just how close they were. "What?"

"You can sleep here, like before. If you wanted." He motioned to the blankets and pillows with a careless wave, then shrugged. "Or not."

You're still asleep, so you can actually do whatever you want. You'll still be rested when you wake up."

"Do you do this every night?" He somehow couldn't imagine it. It was too peaceful, cheery, of a place to have bred a Dark Lord.

"Yes." Tom said simply. It was easy and casual. Voice sturdy and sure and body relaxed.

Yet somehow Harry knew it was a lie.

"Okay." Harry said, turning away from him. He had lied, Harry had lied, they could both be good liars here together. In this strange little paradisaical forest that Tom had created.

They sat in silence for several minutes more. Tom seemed perfectly happy to sit there, doing nothing, but now Harry wasn't tired, probably a side effect of the dream. He didn't know what to do with himself. He was just about to get up again when Tom spoke.

"I always wanted to live near a place like this."

Harry sat back down, hard.

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Harry settled back down, looking at Tom with open shock. As though he had just grown a full set of horns instead of making a innocent confession. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I just...wasn't expecting you to say that."

"And why not?" Tom rose a brow at him.

"Why tell me something like that?" Harry asked. It was a pretty good question, Tom supposed.

"You know I'm an orphan, right?"

Harry opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. He didn't seem to know how to answer. Tom helped him out.

"I know you are as well," he said as easily as he could, turning back to

the spring, “I know how difficult it can be. Being alone. Especially here at Hogwarts.”

Harry snorted, from anyone else it would have been uncouth, from Harry it was cute. “Yeah, I got that...Slytherin is really...er...concerned with family.”

“It isn’t just Slytherin, Harry. Blood purity is important among all the houses and all of the Wizarding World. If you don’t want to be devoured, you need to learn that.” Harry’s only reply was to fidget some more, Tom laughed derisively. “You must have been pretty secluded living with your godfather if he didn’t teach any of this to you.”

“Something like that.” Harry mumbled softly.

He was locking up again, turning small and quiet. Like he had in class. Like he was in the common room. Tom thought fast, this was the most Harry had ever spoken to him, the most he had ever focused his attention on Tom. Just Tom. He didn’t want that to slip through his fingers so soon. He tried again...family might be off limits but what about...

“Do you play chess?”

“I...what?” Harry blinked his large jade eyes at him again.

“Chess, Wizarding chess, do you play.” Tom wove a hand and there between them on the blanket was now a chess board complete with tiny animated figures. They all waved their little hands up at Harry, hopeful.

“Uh...yes.” He said, a little unsure.

“Then lets play,” Tom sat up, with a though he rearranged the board, white facing Harry, “you go first. I insist.”

Hesitantly, and with many looks at Tom to make sure he was serious, Harry took up a pawn and made the first move.

Something sharp, frozen, and dark inside of Tom thawed, just a little bit.

Harry was okay at chess. He was no Ron, but against a regular player he was good enough. Tom, of course, was not your regular player. He was good. Very good. Better than Ron, probably. There was no way Harry was going to win against him. But game after game he gave it his all. They played, they talked about little things like the weather and other dull topics, and Tom would win. Each time he reset the game with a wave of his hand. He probably didn't need to wave it, it was a dream after all. But it was clear he enjoyed the gesture. The show of it all.

Every time the game reset, white pieces in Harry's court, black in Tom's.

"You won, you should be white this time." Harry had said the first time.

"I told you," Tom said with a small smile, "I insist." And that was all he would say on it. Harry didn't bring it up again.

At some point Tom announced that the night was over, it was time to wake up. Harry didn't know what tipped him off. The sun never moved in this place. Time seemed to stand still. But as soon as he said it Harry found himself blinking up at ceiling above his head, early morning light just brightening the waters.

Harry threw back the curtain, no one was up yet just like the day before. Unlike the day before Harry didn't wait, didn't question the situation. He was rested, even though, for all purposes, he spent the night awake and playing chess. He simply grabbed his pack of toiletries and prepared for the day.

The day went exactly how it had before...perhaps exactly as it had since the term had started. Tom was too busy to do more than catch Harry's eye at breakfast, giving a small wink before turning to address another student, Hufflepuff that day. Every other time Harry saw him he likewise was held in some sort of conversation or watching the masses with great intent. As though constantly ready to lend a hand or quell an argument, whatever might be needed of him.

It was possible that was just how Tom's days were. Maybe he spent all day preforming as Head Boy between classes, and the perfect, diligent student during them. And in the evenings he helped kids with their homework and ran the common room with an iron fist.

It sounded exhausting.

When the hell did he find time to do all of that and become a budding dark lord?

That evening Harry was back in Tom's dream, the chess board laid out once more. White facing Harry, black towards Tom. Without a word of greeting, or any comment on the day, Harry made the first move, and waited.

Tom smiled, wolfish and sharp, and moved a piece of his own.

Days passed in this fashion. Harry woke, well rested and ready for the day. Which seemed to go better than the weeks before. Perhaps it was the dreams, or just that Harry was finally sleeping, but he hadn't felt so good in a very long time. Before he knew it the weeks and seasons were passing. The days growing colder, wetter. His evenings filled with study, long baths, and pleasant dreams. For a long time Harry just was. Happy. Content. And worry free.

For the most part.

"Is this how it was set up last night?" Harry asked, squinting down at the board. He had just entered the dream, Tom, of course, was already there, their game from last night still set out. Only...

"Of course it is." Tom said, easy and cheerful.

The liar.

"You only had one of my Bishops last night." Harry glared at him, arms crossed over his chest.

"Is that right?" Tom asked smoothly.

"Yes."

"Silly me," he said, not sounding at all remorseful as he plucked one of the little ivory bishops up and placed it on the board. Right in the spot it should have been. The chess piece mimicked Harry's poster, glaring at Tom with all his tiny might. "I guess I must have forgotten."

"Sure." Harry huffed, he wasn't actually mad, he had to fight a smirk as Tom took his move. He was going first tonight, but he wouldn't be taking Harry's bishop on the first move.

Harry made his move and waited. Tom enjoyed taking his time,

drawing out his moves as though he were really putting thought into them. Harry knew he did it for his benefit, he wasn't so good that he could give Tom Riddle a run for his galleons...yet.

Watching Tom, as it turned out, was a good way to learn.

"You know," Tom said lazily, making his next move, "You could join me in the waking world sometime."

Harry blinked up at him, Tom had stretched out over his side of the blanket, his focus still on the board. "Join you?"

"Yes. By the fire, in the library, at dinner. You don't have to eat exclusively with your year."

"Everyone else does..." Harry tried to set his focus on the board again.

"They do tend to, though it isn't a rule or anything."

Harry snorted, "Didn't feel the need to add that one?"

"It's important for people to be able to make their own choices. Don't look so surprised, Harry," Tom laughed lightly, "I know there are a lot of rules, but you have to admit that if you hadn't been wandering around alone you most likely wouldn't have been attacked that once."

Harry shook his head, finally making his move. "It's probably best that I don't...your friends don't seem to like me very much." Abraxas' ire could be Harry's imagination. If it wasn't for the fact he'd grown up around another Malfoy and had learned their many looks of anger, hatred, and disappointment all too well.

Tom waved his hand as though banishing the thought, "Don't mind them. Purebloods are....slow to change."

Harry bit his lip in worry, they were close to topics of conversation that Harry really wanted to steer clear of. In the weeks of their nightly games they had managed to not talk of anything of consequence. Harry had figured that Tom must like the distraction. He was rather, horrendously, overworked in the waking world, controlling his dreams like this was probably the only time he ever really let go of his Head Boy persona and relaxed. Keeping the conversations light and strictly on school work, the changing weather, and the game before them.

Now though.

There was plenty of talk in the common room. Younger students who would ask questions of older students, and Harry had over heard numerous times the Tale of Tom Riddle. He was the Heir of Slytherin. He had come into the school nameless and alone, only to prove that he not only belonged with them, he was meant to lead them. It had been his parseltongue at first, the thing that set him apart and above the rest. Then the stories were either vague or so outlandish that Harry often just ignored them.

He was nearly 100% sure that Tom had never ridden a dragon into battle and came back with the head of a giant. It was...ludicrous. If rather hilarious. If he were being honest.

“Harry?”

Harry jumped and hastily moved a piece across the board, he didn't even see what it was.

“Well that's...an interesting move.” Tom said in good humor.

“I'm not...you know...a pureblood.” Harry said suddenly. He couldn't really say why, only that he wanted, needed, to see what Tom might say at the confession.

For as much as he was enjoying his time in Tom's dreams...he couldn't, shouldn't, forget who he was actually talking to.

Tom looked up at Harry's mumbled words, a perfectly sculpted brow raised, “I hadn't thought that you were.”

“Oh?”

“Of course not, if you were we would have heard about you before. You look like one, but, your name.”

“Right...my name.” Harry fisted his hands into the folds of his robes, “My f-father was muggleborn. My mother was a pureblood.”

Tom nodded, “I thought something of the sort. What was her maiden name? Maybe you have relatives here.”

Harry shook his head and spoke quickly. “I'm not interested in making family connections. She was pretty far removed from her family anyway...I think...I never got to ask her about it. It doesn't matter.”

There was a long pause, Tom stared at the board, he didn't make a

move. "I never knew my parents either," he looked to Harry, eyes dark and intense, "there are ways of finding out after the fact, you know. Even if your parents are dead."

Harry shook his head again. "I don't care to know." He wanted to back out of this conversation right now. "It's your turn."

"So it is," Tom plucked up a piece and moved it.

They went back to benign topics after that. Harry steering the conversation whenever he thought Tom might be veering back to territory he wanted to avoid. Eventually Tom sat up, declaring the evening over. He gave Harry one last, linger look, something in his eyes, in the set of his jaw that Harry had trouble placing.

Almost like he wanted to say something, do something, but was holding back.

"I do hope you'll think about what I said, about joining me when we're awake."

"I'll...I'll think about it." Harry said softly under his piercing gaze.

"Good." And with that one word. Harry woke up.

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Tom felt better, lighter, than had a in a while. Since the ritual, at the very least. Now that he was sleeping better his head was clearer. His plans for his final year were starting to take real shape. He was the top of every class, had received several missives from prominent members of the Ministry regarding his future. And was well on his way to securing another Horcrux.

One was good.

One was fantastic.

But one wasn't enough.

He had a contact, someone who had flushed out the last details he needed for such an endeavor. Using the accidental death of that girl had been good at the time. Resourceful, even. But he wanted

something bigger, more meaningful, for the next. His contact wanted to meet at Hogsmead, which meant waiting almost another whole month for the information.

Tom could be patient. His plans had not really changed over the years, only grown and solidified. And with something of this magnitude.

Oh yes. Tom could wait.

He had never been one for idle down time. There was always something that he could perfect, or some thread that he could tie to himself for future use. Any free time was spent lending a hand when it was needed, be it a professor or student, it hardly mattered. There was always someone to win over, to keep close, to impress how much of a charming, helpful man Tom Riddle was.

It made for busy days, if often trying and repetitive. Necessities. The trials one had to endure for success. Tom had long ago learned the importance of such things. At least the moments he now took to rest did not feel like such a waste. His shared dreams with Harry could be looked at as another string tied to his web.

Sleeping, because try as he may to convince Harry to join him and his followers during the waking hours, he had yet to wander down their end of the table, or join them near the fire of an evening. Though every time Tom caught sight of him during the days, a small figure next the wildly flapping Alphard that was his constant shadow, he had always been busy either with his nose in a book or listening to something one of their peers had said.

It was at least some balm to Tom's roughened nerves that Harry was always looked after. Safe.

Weeks passed swiftly. Days spent in lessons and being the perfect Head Boy. Nights he spent basking in emerald green eyes and a bright smile. Finding his way into Harry's good graces had been something of a trial and error process. He kept to himself mostly, which made it difficult for Tom to just happen upon him in the common room. Alphard said he rarely spoke about much outside of lessons and, oddly enough, Quiddich. In fact, it had been hard for Tom to find topics on which Harry would gladly engage in when they dreamed together.

But, oh, when he did hit on something that Harry enjoyed, the differences were outstanding. Finding the right words to make him laugh, and he opened up like a blossom to the sun. Sometimes Tom would say something that would bring out Harry's sharp wit and

wicked grins.

As well as their time together was going, he was never able to illicit more than a, "I'll think about it," from Harry upon asking him to join Tom in the waking world.

Weeks turned into a month. Tom was a patient man.

That did not mean that it hadn't begun to wear on him.

September waned with a few sputtering rainstorms, giving way to a soggy October. Try as it might, the sun never seemed to stay out for longer than a breath of two at a time. Soon November would rush in with freezing winds and a barrage of storms, and the first Quiddich match and Hogsmead trip of the year.

It was the topic of much chatter as Tom lead the way back to the castle from the seventh year greenhouses. Even Abraxas was animated about the up coming events. What he would purchase at his favorite stores, what the out come of their match against Hufflepuff would be. He did not say these things to Tom. He knew better than to pester his lord with such trivialities. Instead he carried on the conversation mostly for the amusement of several girls in their class.

That was, until the girls turned their attention away from Abraxas' flowing blond hair and inane chatter to gaze with longing further up the grounds. It was Abraxas' sneer and low growl that drew Tom's attention more the flighty whims of the girls.

At the top of the next hill was a group headed towards the forest's edge. His eyes fell on Harry instantly. He led the group next to a nearly skipping Alphard, the rest of the sixth years huddled close behind them. It was chilly enough already that most had taken out their cloaks and scarves, even within the walls of the castle.

For a moment the two groups regarded each other, not used to meeting in such a way, before continuing on. Harry and Alphard had Care of Magical Creatures this hour, he had glimpsed it on Harry's schedules that first day. Sixth year, late October, dreary with sudden bursts of sunlight, there were a few shadow creatures that lived on the edge of the forest they could be going to observe. Not truly dark things, just animals that thrived in the chill, dark, and rain.

Beside him Abraxas was nearly vibrating with the urge to remain civil. He perhaps thought that he had been subtle in his dislike for Harry. The glares he's throw Harry's way, the snide comments he didn't think

Tom knew he made. He had no way of knowing of Tom's deepening interest in Harry, only that Tom had once said he had found him interesting. That wasn't what held his tongue though. It was one of Tom's rules, never speak ill of a housemate out in the open. There were too many Ravenclaws around for Abraxas to make any of the little smug remarks about Harry that he had begun to mummer under his breath in the common room.

Tom smiled broadly, tipping his head towards Abraxas, prepared to say something mockingly jovial. Maybe something along the line of Abraxas needing to greet their fellow Slytherins. Something that Abraxas couldn't just ignore, something he would have to act on so as to not anger Tom. He had only opened his mouth to speak though when high pitched shriek echoed across the open field, pulling Tom's attention away from Abraxas' pale and pinched face.

On another rise, frolicking through the swaying dead grass, was two Thestrals. They pranced, almost dance like. One bowing low to the other before, with a flap of giant leathery wings they took off racing down the hill.

Beside Tom, Rosier stepped forward, he was the only one in the group besides Tom who would be able to see what was going on. Though the rest had quieted, following Tom's gaze to what they thought was just a bare hill. "I suppose they got out of their pin again." Rosier said, low, unaffected.

Tom hummed in agreement. Kettleburn was always loosing track of his creatures. Thestrals weren't anywhere near as dangerous as the more superstitious liked to think they were, especially the ones raised in captivity. They were docile. Nothing harmful or ominous about them.

"Well, that's interesting." Rosier wasn't watching the Thestral's any longer when Tom looked up, instead he was focused further up the hill. At the group of the sixth years.

For the most part everyone was still milling around, though now they were cutting their attentions from the hill where the Thestral were racing towards them, and...Harry.

Harry is the only one on the hill watching the beasts approach. Tom didn't even have to wonder if he could see them. It would explain some things. Harry's hesitance to speak of his past. The edge of sadness that always seemed to surround him. Any remaining doubt

was wiped away when after a short conversation with Harry, Alphard exclaimed, "You can see them?" So loudly that the entire castle must have heard.

It's unclear what Harry's reaction was. He was so buried in his large velvet cloak that only the top of his pink cheeks showed, but soon enough he was separating from the group to continue his route to the forest. The rest of their group following at a slower pace. Some wistfully glancing in the direction they had last seen Harry look, not knowing that the Thestrals had long since passed.

"Yes," Tom said, low, thoughtful, "that is interesting." Gathering his own cloak close he began walking the path once more. "Come," he said over his shoulder, all but Rosier having remained frozen in their tracks. "We mustn't be late, now." The other's, of course, had nothing to do but follow, as slow and despondent as the sixth years were with Harry.

Harry. Was there a way that Tom could bring this up without pushing him away? A way to share some sort of burden together that would instead draw Harry closer? Tom had seen death outside of the girl who fueled his horcrux after all. The tragic death of growing up in a poor orphanage in a time of war and deprivation. Nights were cold, food was scarce. And medicine even more so. It did not matter that Tom had not been terribly effected by such things. The near constant crying in the night was marginally less disturbing than when it stopped. By morning there would one less child at the table for breakfast.

One less rasping cough in the crowd of fearful and sick children.

Tom had never feared though. He had never gotten ill. It was magic, he knew that now. Some powerful force within him that had kept such things at bay. But he could leave that part out. Tell Harry the rest. Show him more of himself than Tom had ever shared with another living soul.

It was with no small amount of...trepidation...awe...epiphany, that he realized he had already done so. In their nightly talks together Tom had slowly began to open up. Just as Harry had done for him.

Perhaps the most outstanding part of it all was that this was not at all upsetting to him.

He just wished he could figure out why...

The rest of the day was horrifically mundane in comparison. Classes came and went with nothing exciting to take his mind away from Harry and his grim past. Their grim pasts. Only a small scuffle in the hall between a Gryffindor fourth year and a third year Hufflepuff girl gave him any respite, short lived as it was. It had been a disappointingly slow day. He didn't even feel bad retiring to the common room to read by the fire before dinner instead of making his usual patrol of the corridor outside of the library. It was always an anthill of activity this time of day. But Tom just couldn't find the motivation for it all.

He had just managed to lose himself in the pages of the book he'd chosen, *Mapping the Wandering Soul* by Owain Cadogan, when the door to the common was thrown open with a bang, a damp and disheveled Alphard storming in a moment later.

"Alphard!" Orion scolded, already snapping his own book closed and rising from his seat before had finished speaking. "What in the name of Merlin do you think you are-"

"Have any of you seen Harry?" Alphard asked hurriedly, stepping out of Orion's path. He was muddled and soaked through, his large dark eyes frantic as he looked from one of them to other.

"What do you mean, have we seen him?" Tom closed his book slowly and rose. Ice to Orion's fire. Alphard froze. "I told you to keep an eye on him."

Alphard swallow visibly. "I...I did, or, I thought I had. He was there in our last class I know! We were looking at some sort of magical moth chrysalis, and I know he was there..."

"And," Tom prompted in a low growl. He would not lose his calm, he would not blow up at Alphard for losing his...for losing Harry. He took a deep breath and said again, a little calmer. "And then what?"

"I...well I had practice," Alphard ran a hand through his already messed up hair.

Red began to seep into Tom's vision. Quiddich. Alphard had neglected a direct order, his one task that Tom had set him, for Quiddich.

"Orion, Abraxas, go look for him in the library. Rosier, Avery, search the Great Hall, maybe he's lingering there until dinner." They nodded as Tom gave out orders, turning as one to go fulfill them.

"Wha...what should I do?"

Tom rounded on Alphard, eyes blazing, if he had less control over himself, over his magic, Alphard would not have still been standing. "You will pray that he is unharmed," Tom said through gritted teeth, "because any harm that has fallen on him I will set on you threefold, do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord." Alphard voice was soft, shaky, as he averted his eyes and bowed to Tom, properly cowed.

Good.

Tom only stopped long enough to pull his cloak from the hook and slip on his shoes before sweeping through the door, slamming it shut behind him.

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Thestrals. It wasn't often that one saw them outside of the start and end of the school year. Of course they were pinned somewhere on the grounds. Harry knew that well enough. He had never actually seen them like this before. Wild and carefree. Lovely in their oddness. They were so much more gentle and kind than people knew. Watching them dance and play as they were filled him with something...sad, but hopeful all at once.

Of course Alphard would notice him looking. Of course he would ask what was going on...He had seen Tom and Rosier look at the Thestrals as well. Not that that was surprising.

Harry had tried to walk away from Alphard's prying questions after that. He didn't want to talk about the Thestrals. He didn't want to talk about why he could see them. It was too complicated. Too painful. And as much as he had grown to like Alphard, it was not something he could ever see himself sharing with him.

Luckily class started as soon as they reached the forest. Professor Kettleburn was a spry man with shockingly white hair and mustache, and bright brown eyes. He could not seem to focus too much on learning that some of the Thestrals had gotten out and were now taking a joy run around the castle grounds, because a group of golden caterpillars had woven metallic chrysalis' in the night and he couldn't contain his glee at finding them.

Harry had looked on with the others, going so far to touch one softly as Kettleburn had instructed. He could, in fact, feel the little creature rolling around in the pod. It was...something...somewhere between fascinating and gross. He could now say he'd seen it, touched it. It was not, however, something that could keep his attention.

The day was chilly. Rainy. Gloomy. Harry only had his cloak, and though it was large and warm, he now wished he'd had the forethought back in the summer to get a pair of gloves and a scarf...something. Oddly enough it was warmer in the forest. Perhaps the trees cut enough of the wind, held enough of the sun's fading warmth. Either way, the warmth was nice, the class was dull...and there was a little hollow near the base of a large tree that kept calling Harry's name.

Slowly he broke away from the group to settle into the little divvet. It was just big enough to curl up in, and boy was it nice to just lay back for a few minutes. They had been standing around for fifteen minutes just listening to Kettleburn ramble on about how the moths would glow gold when they broke free in a few weeks. Harry could still hear everything just fine. Even when he pulled the hood of his cloak down over his eyes and snuggled further into it's massive folds.

He really needed to write to Jean-Loup and thank him for making his cloaks so warm a voluminous. That was the last thing on Harry's mind as he closed his eyes.

It was the sound of the rain that eventually woke him. Large drops falling on the leaves around him with such forceful racket that had Harry jerking out of his once peaceful nap. Harry was still dry, despite the current downpour. The wind had picked up and he was no longer as warm as he once had been. Crawling out of the little hollow Harry noticed for the first time the clearing was empty. The class must have long since dispersed. Which meant that Harry had missed anything else that Kettleburn might have said about the moths.

God he really didn't want to have to read anything on them, but it looked like he might need to. Leave it to Kettleburn to throw them a pop quiz on the damn things just because he thought they were neat.

Harry made to stand, but was tugged back down immediately. It only took a moment to realize he had snagged his robes on a small bush with black spiky limbs. He could probably pull away...and rip his robes. He really didn't want to do that. Now that he actually had nice clothing he wanted to make sure they stayed in good condition. So

with a sigh he bent back down to begin the arduous task of untangling himself from the bush.

All around the forest things moved, groaned, cawed, and hooted. Twigs snapped, wind chuffed through the boughs. The forest was alive around him, as it always was when Harry had entered it. It was not usually something that bothered him. Then again, he had never really been in the forest alone before.

A branch snapped somewhere behind him, Harry whipped around as much as he could but there was nothing in the gloom that he could make out. How long had he slept? The forest was growing dark around him, luminous eyes began to peek out at him from the underbrush or a tall branch.

Harry didn't panic. He had his wand. He was one...two....maybe a handful twists away from freeing himself and then he'd leave. Nothing would follow him. He certainly didn't double his efforts, and only end up stabbing his fingers on the thorns, when the sound of something slithering over the fallen leaves joined the falling rain. Certainly not! And he didn't let out a surprised squeak when a shadow descended on him, wrapping around his body and....

It was not a shadow but two arms, pale hands that moved Harry's out of the way and went to untangling his robes with sure, swift movements. The body behind him was larger than his own. Warm and, oh.

Oh!

"Tom?" Harry asked, "Why are you in the forest?"

Instead of answering, Tom finished freeing Harry before grabbing him tightly by the elbows and nearly lifting Harry completely off his feet, away from the thorn bush and back towards the edge of the forest.

"Tom?" Harry asked again, but the only answer he got, beyond stormy brown eyes, was Tom gripping him by the neck and pulling him close as he marched Harry back to the castle. Part of him wanted to pull away, ask what Tom thought he was doing. But he was warm, some of Tom's cloak now covering Harry as well. And...as much as he would have liked to deny it, Harry had been a little worried back there. The forest really wasn't the best place to take a nap.

Duly noted.

Won't happen again!

So he allowed it. As well as the little bit of warmth to fill his chest that had little to do with the extra cloak and body heat, and everything to do with the fact that Tom had come for him. That he seemed genuinely upset that Harry might have been in danger.

He should have known that it was too good to last.

As soon as the door to the common room closed behind them Tom was rounding on him, dark eyes flashing, "Detention," he said, voice and body visibly shaking.

Harry gaped at him, "What?"

"I said, detention."

"Wha- you can't do that!" Harry spit back at him, "I haven't done anything!"

"I told you never to be out by yourself. You've been told, twice now. And still you chose to wander the forest alone!" Tom had gotten his body under control, but his eyes were still too bright, his voice still too high and heated.

"I didn't 'wander' the forest alone. The class left me." Harry crossed his arms over his chest and glared as best he could. "That does not count as breaking one of your little rules." He couldn't help the mocking tone that came out, he still thought Tom's rules for the house were idiotic, over-protective, and paranoid.

"You were attacked in the halls not a month ago, these rules are there to keep everyone safe. The other houses will not hesitate to pick us off one by one if they see us alone or divided."

Harry really couldn't argue with that. He wanted to, because as much as bullying was a thing in his time too, it had never gotten as bad as it so obviously was now. When things came to blows in his time both parties were usually fighting for a while. No one tried to strike down a lone student in the hall just because they felt like it.

That didn't mean it would always happen, or that it wasn't still paranoid. But...

Harry sighed, "I still didn't break your rules." He said flatly, "falling asleep and waking up alone does not equate wandering off on my

own.”

Tom’s eye twitched, the rest of his face falling deadly still, “you,” he said, softly incredulous, “fell asleep in class?”

Harry blinked at him, “Is that, ah...is that another one of your rules?” Judging by way Tom pinched the bridge of his nose and took several deep breaths, Harry would hazard a guess towards ‘Yes!’

“Detention, Harry,” Tom finally said, in calm control once more. When he looked up at Harry again there was nothing a great since of exhaustion about him, all anger having fled. “Sunday and Wednesday evenings in Professor Merrythought’s classroom. She hasn’t sorted through her files in nearly sixty years, I know she’ll appreciate the help.” And then he smirk.

Smirked! Like it was all great fun!

And just like that, Harry was angry again. Yes, he probably shouldn’t have fallen asleep during class. And he should have been more aware of his surroundings so that if he had fallen asleep he could have woken up and left when the others. And he very well could have come to some harm in the forest alone. But he hadn’t. And no one had seen him there and attacked. And no one needed to know that he had been anything but a perfect student during a very bored lesson.

But was there any way he could properly argue this with Tom? He already knew the answer was no. Tom ruled all of Slytherin. He had his rules and you either followed them or paid the price. It didn’t matter a part of Harry understood. That Tom didn’t even do a bad job of keeping the peace, that his rules had purpose. It had just been....an exceeding bad and trying day, and the last thing he wanted was to be yelling with Tom, smug and sure of himself, in the entryway to the common room.

Without a word Harry slipped off his shoes and threw his cloak onto the peg with his name before pushing past Tom. The whole common was silent. Every eye turned towards them and their little spat. Harry paid them no attention as he walked through, head held high, on his way to the sixth year dorms to draw himself a scalding bath.

It was Thursday...he had two days before his detentions started. Two day to gather himself. To forget this all happened before having to face reality again. He spent the rest of the evening soaking in too hot water. Chasing any linger chill away with bubbles and steam. By the time he had pulled himself out and gotten into bed the rest of the

dorm was still, curtains drawn, lights snuffed out. Then another consequence made itself known.

Harry didn't want to see Tom in his dreams that night. He was still too emotionally sore from being marched back to the dorms like a child and given what he still felt was an undue punishment.

He laid there for a long, long time. Staring up at the gently undulating waves above him. Anytime his eyes began to droop he forced them open. It wasn't until the light above him began to change with the coming dawn that Harry allowed himself to drift into a light, fitful sleep. There were no rolling hills, no golden sunshine, or games of chess spread across blankets. Just dark, and cold, and the overwhelming sense that he was alone.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, dears!

Sorry this took so long, but things were not super great for a while. As I know it's been for a lot of you. I'm feeling better, and life is a little more settled now, so hopefully I'll be able to work more on this and other things in a more timely manner.

This chapter took a bit, I've had to do a lot more planning for this story than I'm used to. Usually my muses only show me things a scene at a time. Giving me one goal to work towards, and when I've reach that scene I usually see another, and another, and so on. This time thought! My muses just came in, dumped a BUNCH of scenes at me, and said, here, figure out the order these are supposed to go in and write it! So where I know a lot of things I want to happen, I've had some trouble figuring out what scenes need to come first.

I think I have it pretty much set now, though. So things should work out a little more smoothly for me in the writing department for a bit.

So this chapter is a little rocky, and they didn't end things on the best of terms, but, well, they're both idiots so what are going to do?

I suppose there is much else to say about this chapter. I hope to start the next one pretty soon, but I need to update some other stories that have also been waiting patiently.

Thank you guys so much for reading and commenting and

everything. I really can't believe how many hits and kudos this story has gotten!!! Thanks again! your support fuels my muses! Please stay safe out there, guys!

I'll see you all...

NEXT TIME!

Detention!

Staring:

Tom Riddle, as Head Boy / Warden

Harry Potter, as The Sulky Youth / Master of Snark

and Professor Merrythought, as The Sassy Teacher Who Has Long Since Forgotten Where She's Left Everything

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 7

Harry was avoiding him.

It was rather hard to miss, even if Tom didn't suddenly find himself on constant alert for Harry's presence.

The night of their...confrontation, Tom wasn't really surprised by Harry's aloofness. He had sent Alphard to check on Harry when it was time for them to head to the Great Hall. Lacks, though he had been that afternoon in his Head Boy duties, Tom couldn't be late for dinner. Ten minutes after sitting down, two arguments, one at the Ravenclaw table and one from Gryffindor had been quelled, and no fewer than five students had come over to ask menial questions of him, when Alphard had arrived. His feet dragging, refusing to meet Tom's eyes as he told him that Harry said he wasn't coming to dinner.

It was troubling...Tom was troubled. Which was not something he had been very often in his life. He told himself it was because Harry had not seemed to understand why Tom had been upset. That was why he was unsettled. It was obvious that Harry hadn't paid attention to the rules that first night. After all, wanting to go for a walk on one's own was one thing, but falling asleep in class! If anyone had seen it would have reflected poorly on the whole house. What if Kettleburn had noticed that one of his students had just decided to nap in the bushes? Losing house points would have been the least of their worries then!

No, Tom had been in the right, and Harry hadn't stayed around long enough to hear him out.

It couldn't last. One thing that Tom was quite certain of was that Harry was a forgiving and kind person. One so rarely saw such things in the pureblood crowd where every sentence had multiple meanings and no one spoke the truth to your face. Harry had been honest, at least on topics he had been comfortable in sharing with Tom. The topics he didn't wish to discuss would simply be met with silence. With Harry, it was the truth or nothing. Back stabbing and duplicity

were not in his nature.

So, of course, he would soon forgive Tom their little spat, and perhaps not agree that the punishment was due, but accept it with the dignity befitting their house.

Still, by the time Tom was settling into his bed he couldn't help but feel that it hadn't been time enough. It had become his habit, after settling his mind and body, to reach within himself, to that place that lit up whenever he was near Harry, and follow it to the source. From there he would go to the meadow by the river, the chess set, the blankets, and Harry.

That night, try as he may, the connection would not form. Tom tried to rest after what left like the hundredth futile attempt to bring Harry into his dreams, going to the dark place where time and matter didn't exist. But rest never came. It was like those first few nights all over again. Something restless grated under his skin, prickled the back of his neck, raced through his mind on an endless loop.

He rose the next morning having gotten no rest at all.

No one would ever know it from looking at him. Tom Riddle would not let his appearance fall just because someone else was upset by something he had done.

He hadn't even done anything!

Other than save Harry from tearing his robes and give him a just detention for breaking house rules.

The image of Harry, crouching in the dark forest, struggling to free himself came unbidden to his mind. Along with it the sudden jump to his heart that had come with the view the first time around. Before Tom had seen that he was not injured, simply caught on a thorn bush. Relief, and yes, anger, had replaced the...he would not call it fear. Tom had never feared anything in his life, he certainly hadn't been afraid then. So, no, not fear. Concern, perhaps.

He banished the image from his mind as he combed his hair and left the dorm. It was a day as any other. He had students to guide and work to do. There were scuffles in the halls and professors to speak with about them. Fridays he had Defense Against the Dark Arts, where he informed Merrythought that Harry would be joining them on Sundays and Wednesdays for the foreseeable future.

Harry, unsurprisingly, said nothing to Tom as he sat next to him in what had become his usual spot. He was a fiery little ball of anger at Tom's side. Almost he could feel the resentment being thrown towards.

His imagination. Obviously. Though he couldn't for the life of him shake the sensation.

Fridays also brought Transfiguration. The bane of Tom's life. Not that he wasn't the top of the class. That he didn't succeed in record time for every little task Dumbledore set them. It wasn't even that Dumbledore never openly acknowledged that Tom was the lead. He couldn't lie when grading, he wouldn't stoop so low as to give Tom less than he deserved then.

It was the looks, mostly, that he would send Tom's way when he thought no one was looking. How he avoided Tom's person in class unless they had to interact with each other. Then there was always a teasing, nearly mocking tone to what he said.

Tom had done some things in life that Dumbledore didn't like. He would like Tom even less if he knew the whole truth. If he knew the things Tom wanted in the very near future he would probably try to have him arrested on the spot. That was hardly the point though. As far as Dumbledore was concerned Tom had given his little trophies back to their owners and never stuck a toe out of line since.

Yet he still looked to Tom as though expecting him to make a mistake.

In seven years he never had.

Eventually, blessedly, Friday drew to an end. All throughout the day Tom had tried to catch Harry's eye. In the Great Hall he had kept his head down. In the halls he had hidden behind Alphard. In class he just ignored Tom's greeting.

Tom was not, absolutely not, frustrated by this.

That night he meditated, relaxed, and once centered, reached for Harry.

Nothing.

As he had the night before he tried again. And again. And again. Over and over there was nothing. Tom didn't want to give up. He wanted to march into the sixth year dorm and force Harry to talk to him until he

came to his senses and just went to sleep already. As he was fairly sure that Harry must be awake. Otherwise Tom would be able to find him. It had always been so simple before.

He didn't though. Instead he rolled over and attempted rest on his own. Harry couldn't keep it up. He would need to sleep at some point.

By the time Sunday afternoon rolled around he was very nearly to the point of finding Harry and shaking some sense into him. Tom hadn't seen him at all on Saturday. He wasn't in the secret room Tom had shown him before, he wasn't on the Quiddich pitch. And Tom couldn't wander off to try looking for him elsewhere.

Luckily, for Harry, he was in the common room that evening. If Tom had needed to send a search party out for him Harry would have found himself writing lines for the rest of the year! He didn't say anything when Tom told him it was time to go. Just rose from his spot on one of the sofas to sweep gracefully across the room to get ready.

Tom could admit it to himself that walking beside Harry through the torch lit halls was the most content and relaxed he'd been for the last few days. Even if Harry still refused to look at him. At Merrythought's door Tom stopped, hand on the latch to keep the door shut just a moment more.

"Harry," he said softly, not too sure what exactly he wanted to say. I'm sorry, didn't seem like the best option. He wasn't sorry.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest, defensive. His robes were red silk, they brought out the green in his eyes, highlighted the creaminess of his skin. Tom usually hated the color...he couldn't quite remember why.

"Yes, Tom?" Harry said after Tom's silence had gone on too long. His eyes were bright, but the hollows under them were too deep. His cheeks too pale. Tom suddenly wanted nothing more than to take it all away. Give Harry what little peace he could. And he was ready to in that moment. To apologize for something he had, just moments before, thought was the right thing to do.

Then the door slid forward and it was all Tom could do to keep from falling forward onto his face.

"Oh, Tom, there you are. Good, good," Merrythought stepped aside to let them in. She had evidently tired of waiting for Tom to arrive and decided to go find him. Though how she imagined she'd traverse the

entire castle looking for him he couldn't fathom. "I seem to have worked myself into something of a disaster with this schedule, I need your help." She had already turned her back on them before she finished.

Tom looked down at Harry, at the hand he had fisted in Tom's robes. He must have grabbed at Tom when the door opened. Wanting to help steady him. Something in Tom's chest turned over, painfully warm and full. Harry released his robes with a little blush as he looked away.

"Come on, Harry," Tom said, gently leading Harry through the door, "I'll show you what to do."

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Tom led him into Professor Merrythought's office. It was full of clutter, the trinkets and souvenirs of a well lived life. There was a fair sight more medieval muggle weapons that Harry would have thought. Swords, maces, a few quite intricately forged war hammers. He didn't get the chance for a better look as Tom stood him before a filing cabinet that took up an entire wall.

The whole wall!

Where the hell was he even supposed to start? He looked over at Merrythought who was handing Tom a stack of papers to shuffle through, she didn't look over at him...did she even know Harry was given the task of sorting through her ancient filings?

Probably not.

With a sigh Harry decided to start with the top drawer furthest to the left and work his way down. It took a few very strong tugs for the drawer to open with a horrendous screech! but he got it, and pulling a stack of dusty parchment from inside, went to work.

Twenty minutes later Harry was pretty sure he was losing his mind.

There was, in fact, nothing about these files that were in any sort of order. There were assignments from the last week in the same cabinet as things handed in nearly

forty years past, and no correlation between the two. Papers from the pop quiz they had taken last month was in the drawer with essays on bogarts from a third year class that probably had great grandchildren now.

He didn't know what to do. Tom had given him an impossible task. Literally, impossible! He sat in the middle of a sea of papers, now out of the confines of their dark prison they scattered around him, an army of yellowing pages that meant to snuff Harry out. He, covered in dust and far too exhausted to even begin to know how to handle any of it, just sat and stared into a far off distance.

"Well, what's all this, then?"

Harry looked up into the smiling face of Professor Merrythought. She was looming over him, leaning on her cane, her eyes sharp and glittering. "I-" he started, cleared his throat and tried again, "I...I don't know what's going on...I don't," he didn't know where to start...how he could finish this? Where could he even leave it for later? "I don't know how..."

Tom came over then to stand next to Merrythought and peer down at him. There was something of concern in his dark eyes, though the corner of his mouth twitched a bit. At least he wasn't out right laughing. Harry would have definitely hexed him then...whatever bonus detention he earned be damned! This was all his fault anyway!

"I suppose you were right, Tom, those files were a mess."

Oh good, at least she was aware there was a problem, suddenly hopeful, Harry said, "is there maybe...some of it that can go?"

"Go?" Her utter confusion sent Harry's poor heart plummeting.

"Y-yes," Harry said, softly hesitant as he reached for one of the papers closest to him, "like this one. An essay on how to protect yourself from, um, shadow gnomes, written by a second year in um...1919." The kid had consistently misspelled the word 'gnome' throughout the essay, the whole paper had received the lowest possible score due to 'shadow gnomes' not actually being a thing. And though a less addled Harry would have found it an exceedingly entertaining read, really the things this kid came up with for defense of these imaginary creatures, there was no reason that he could see for Merrythought hanging onto it at all. Let alone for some twenty odd years.

He hazard a glance at Merrythought, hopeful that she would see

reason. But if anything she looked even more confused than before. Behind her Tom stood just out of her sight, a hand held over his mouth, eyes bright with merriment. And, oh yes, Harry was going to hex him later.

“If I may, “ Tom said, having evidently put himself back together once more as he stepped beside Merrythought, “it’s getting late, and all of this,” he wove a hand at Harry and the mess of papers, “can wait until Wednesday. After all, he’s done the hard part already.” He laughed fondly, and though Merrythought didn’t join him in it, she no longer looked like Harry had suggested they murder her children.

He would, perhaps, hex Tom a little less severely.

With a flick of his wand Tom gathered up all the papers and set them aside near the filing cabinets but out of the way. Harry picked himself up off the floor as Tom and Professor Merrythought wrapped things up at their little, over crowded table. He gave a few futile pats to his robes, imagining the cartoonishly large cloud of dust that would probably follow him for the rest of the night.

The way back to the dorms was as silent and awkward as their trip to Merrythought’s office had been. Whatever Tom had been about to say before he didn’t seem in a hurry to pick the conversation back up. Which was fine. It wasn’t as though Harry wanted to talk to him or anything. What did he have to say anyway? Hey, thanks for giving me the worst possible detention. It was super fun swimming in a pile of dust and ancient papers. Can’t wait to do it! So glad I don’t have allergies!

When they returned to the dorm Harry threw off his shoes at the door and headed straight for the sixth year dorm and the baths. After taking a quick shower to wash off the dust he slipped into one of the large baths. It was always a little surprising that the others didn’t use them as much as he did. Were they not aware of how much of a treat this was? That the other dorms...or well...Griffindor, didn’t have such luxuries?

“So...I guess it didn’t go well?”

Harry looked up from the soft blue bubbles to see Alphard perched on his knees near the edge of the bath, giving him a very sympathetic look. He would sometimes come and check up on Harry when he had disappeared into the baths for too long. Stating his concern that Harry’d either drowned, or had grown a fin and gills. Harry had been

quite uncomfortable with it the first time, now though, he was rather happy to see a friendly face.

Harry snorted into the bubbles, “you can say that again.”

Alphard’s lips twitched, though he did seem to be trying not to enjoy Harry’s pain so much, “I told you, she’s a barmy old bat.”

Harry leaned back with a groan, resting his head on the side of the bath, “She hasn’t touched some of those cabinets in years, other than to pile more useless papers in them.”

“Did Tom say how long you have to do it for?” Alphard relaxed a bit as well, stretching his long legs out so he could face Harry better.

“No...but knowing him it’ll probably be until the job is done...which will be never. Hey!” Harry perked a little at a sudden idea, “you wanna go flying tomorrow afternoon? You don’t have practice right?” The Slytherin team had already been assembled in full at the start of the year, he could have still asked to try out as a backup, or possible replacement...but the idea of expending so much aggressive energy had not been appealing. Still wasn’t, actually.

“I ugh...I’d love to but,” Alphard rubbed the back of his neck, his shoulders slumped, “but I have detention...”

“What! Since when?”

“Since Friday. I erm...I told Kettleburn his moths were shiny garbage.” Alphard gave a very strained laugh, “Yes, yes, complete garbage. Old bugger gave me detention everyday for the next month.”

“But that’s...” Insane. Unfair...not at all something Alphard would even do. He might grumble about class but he was never anything other than polite to their teachers during them. He feared Orion’s wrath more than he hated learning.

“I know, but there isn’t much I can do about it now.”

“Yeah...” Harry slumped a little more into the hot water, suddenly weighed down by the day. Something wasn’t quite as it should be...but he was too tired to properly care.

The days passed in the same bone weary fashion. At least Harry had

been able to sleep for most of the week, even if his dreams were back to being dark, cold, and restless. He came out feeling marginally better than he had before sleep, which wasn't saying very much. Tom didn't try talking to him again, though he always looked seconds away from opening his mouth and saying something that would probably make Harry even more angry at him.

It was clear he wasn't sorry for his part in Harry's misery, and it didn't help that by the second Sunday Harry hadn't made much progress in his sorting. At least he would have a whole week until he had to immerse himself into the sea of crumpling parchment and dust. Wednesday was Halloween, and Dippet had so graciously declared that all detentions would be postponed so that everyone could enjoy the feast.

The day dawned, cold and stormy. Stepping out into the drafty corridors filled him such deep nostalgia. The Great Hall and entryway were decorated with giant pumpkins and autumn colored leaves that had been enchanted to fall and swirl around on their own. Thunder cracked all throughout the day. So forceful the castle shook, drowning out conversations before blinding light filled every room. The students all laughed and cheered at such a spectacle. But it was far too close to other Halloweens for Harry's taste.

Thunder so loud one could slip a troll into the school unnoticed. Fleeing back into the castle after Herbology, covered in mud and soaked to the bone reminded him far too much of a certain Death Day Party he had attended in a similar state. Alphard knew a spell to clean and dry his robes, 'because Orion,' was the only explanation he gave before setting himself and Harry to rights.

But even dry and warm, and frightfully weary Harry couldn't shake the gloom that had loomed over him the whole day. This was worse than when he first fell into this...timeline...world? He felt worse than when he realized he wouldn't be seeing his friends for a while. If ever again. Worse than starting a new year of school without them. Halloween was the anniversary of his and Ron's friendship with Hermione. It wasn't always the best of days for him and his friends, but they had always been together for it.

Nearly Headless Nick was still around somewhere, though the Great Hall was always so full that even the ghosts blended into the frey. It wasn't as though Harry could just walk up to him and start a conversation anyway. Just go, hey, we will know each other in about fifty years and I'm feeling kinda down, let's go celebrate your Death

Day by sniffing moldy cheese....

Yeah, no...he'd pass on that.

Dumbledore knew him in the future and this Dumbledore knew he wasn't from this time, but he hadn't really had the opportunity to speak with him much yet.

Then that only left one other person he had any sort of connection to in his time, and well...He was still not speaking to Tom...and thoughts of their shared future did not help ease his sorrows any.

So when dessert was rolling to a close and Dumbledore rose to excuse himself from the staff table, Harry made to follow.

The Hall was a cacophony of yelling and laughter. Sweets were being passed around, a few students, all muggle-born, had magicked fantastical costumes and were parading around the hall to the jeers and cheers of their peers. No one noticed as Harry slipped down the aisle to follow Dumbledore through the little door near the staff table.

"Professor?" Harry called out softly, shutting the door and the noise of the Great Hall out behind him.

"Harry?" Dumbledore turned, startled confusion replaced by twinkling joy so quickly it was almost not there. As always Harry was struck by how young he was, how he wasn't Harry's Dumbledore. With his bright auburn hair, his smooth face. But he would be, there were things there already that nearly stopped Harry's heart to see. Close, but not quite.

Harry thought vaguely about turning around and going back to the feast, he hadn't eaten much, he hadn't been properly hungry in days actually. He really shouldn't be troubling someone who didn't even know him...No, no, he needed to talk to someone and Dumbledore was the only safe option.

"Let's go for a walk, shall we?" Fifty years younger and Dumbledore still knew how to read Harry like a book. With a small smile Harry nodded and followed Dumbledore out into the hall.

Thunder cut the silence between them as they walked the deserted halls, blinding bolts of lightning illuminated the path before them, so stark and harsh even the torches seemed dull in their wake. It was strange to not be led to the gargoyle but rather down the wing where the Transfiguration class was. Dumbledore's office was next door,



smaller than the Head Master's office though no less warm and over crowded.

The furniture was a bit more cozy, over-stuffed chairs near a fire, piled with pillows and worn blankets. Dumbledore made a small attempt to tidy the chairs before motioning Harry to take one. He sat a little awkwardly, feeling silly all the sudden. So he was a little down, it probably had more to do with the weather than anything. He should go try to make the Room of Requirements into that sunny meadow again.

That sent a sharp pang through Harry's chest for another reason altogether.

"Lemon drop?" Dumbledore asked, Harry looked up to see him holding a crystal bowl of yellow candies.

Unthinking, he took one, "Thanks," he said softly, popping the sweet and sour treat into his mouth.

"Now," Dumbledore said, seating himself in the other chair with a soft sigh of relief, "What has you out of sorts, dear boy?"

Harry sucked idly on the lemon drop for a while, pondering over how best to answer such a question. "I suppose..." he started, staring into the fire to avoid Dumbledore's equally bright eyes, "I suppose I'm just missing my friends today."

"Aah," Dumbledore, leaned back in his chair, smiling wistfully, "It can be hard to enjoy special occasions when those dear to you are absent."

Harry nodded to the flames, "I guess I just didn't realize how special Halloween was for us until I couldn't celebrate it with them."

Dumbledore hummed at his words, seemingly content to simply let Harry enjoy his company and the fire. After several minutes of silence though he said, "I do hope you've been settling in well. I had meant to ask earlier, but-"

"It's fine," Harry said hurriedly, "Things have been...good."

"I've noticed you've grown close to Alphard Black. He's a good boy, cheerful."

Harry gave a little laugh, Alphard was far more than cheerful, he was boundless energy made flesh.

“And the rest of your house?”

Harry sighed, “They’re fine. They’ve been polite to me, and Tom has been helpful...” he trailed off rather lamely. Dumbledore didn’t like Tom, the rest of the Slytherins had told Harry that Dumbledore wasn’t too keen on the house as a whole, though he had never seen any of this supposed prejudice in his classes.

“Tom Riddle?” Dumbledore asked in an overly casual way. Harry was not fooled.

“He’s...not how I thought he would be.” Which was partly true, he was prepared for charming and faux caring, he hadn’t been prepared for whatever it was he and Tom had been sharing before their little rift.

“You knew of him before?”

Harry plucked nervously at his robes before he could meet Dumbledore’s eyes, a little smirk curving his lips, “I could say, but that would be telling you about the future, wouldn’t it.”

Dumbledore chuckled, his bright eyes twinkling for real, “So it would be.” He sat there for a while, simply smiling at Harry. “You know,” he said, distant and thoughtful, “I often worried about him...Tom, I mean. I fear he is planning on taking a dangerous and foolish path in life.”

Harry nodded, he too feared the same. Though it was hard to imagine Tom turning into the twisted form from Harry’s nightmares. He wasn’t that creature. Not yet. “A very wise wizard once told me that it was our choices that define us,” Harry said softly, “Tom still has a few more big choices to make...I think.”

“Hmmm,” Dumbledore hummed thoughtfully, “Very sound advice indeed.” They shared a little smile, then Dumbledore sat forward with a clap of his hands.

“Tell me, Harry, do you happen to like Quiddich?” And like that Dumbledore steered the conversation away from uncomfortable, or dangerous topics. He may not yet be the pillar of strength that Harry knew so well, but he was close. He still knew how to help Harry when he needed it, and he was once more so grateful to have Dumbledore in his life.

The night was long when Harry finally made it to his dorm. Dumbledore had kept him talking for hours, calling up tea, roast beef

sandwiches and treacle tarts which Harry had eaten under his watchful eyes. Afterwards he had walked Harry down to the dungeons so he wouldn't get in trouble for walking the halls alone, by either another professor or Tom.

And so Harry found himself, full and drowsy in a completely empty common room. Evidence of a smaller celebration was all around him as he ghosted across the room, his stockinged feet barely a whisper over the floorboards. There were empty glasses next to pitchers of pumpkin juice and butterbeer, a pot of tea here or there, and a few sandwiches and cakes on trays. He found Gemma snoozing happily on a silver tray, the remains of what might have been cocktail franks wrapped in bacon scattered around her.

Harry lifted her up as carefully as he could, cradling her heavier than usual body to his chest. She stirred when he placed her on a warm flat rock under her tiny magicked sun.

"The tiny mice were especially good tonight." She hissed softly, curling up once Harry released her, "very crispy." She closed her luminous eyes with a happy hiss.

Harry smiled down at her, running a finger over the fine scales of her face as she fell once more asleep. "Glad to hear it, happy Halloween, Gemma." He left to get to rest, seeking out his own bed.

The dorm was dark and silent, not a single curtain moved as he entered and crossed the room. Stashing his robe in the bottom of the wardrobe and stared down at his bed. Cold...and empty.

That was what he had been feeling. Had been for days, the holiday just forced him to look it straight in the eye. He was tired.

Tired of not being able to rest.

Tired of being alone.

His shift didn't have pockets, so he had to carry his wand as he left the room. It wasn't far. Just at the end of the hall. He had always known where it was, though he had never had any reason to go further than the sixth year dorm.

It wasn't far, but it was such a daunting distance. He turned around to go back several times, almost made it all the way back to his room once. But no...he had made a choice...he wasn't going to pretend anymore.

Nothing happened when he placed his hand on Tom's doorknob. He half expected it to curse him into next year. Certainly Tom had some sort of defense on his room. Voldemort was insanely paranoid...Tom probably was too.

But nothing happened. Not even when he turned the knob and opened the door.

Tom's room was large, though smaller than the communal rooms. There was a seating area, his own fireplace, a desk, and a large bed in the centre. Another door was probably a private bath too.

Like Harry's dorm a large window in the ceiling filled the room with a soft, undulating greenish light. Enough that Harry could make his way to the bed without tripping over anything. Enough that Tom's still form was softly limned on the bed.

He gripped his wand tightly as he approached. If Tom woke up swinging Harry wanted to be ready with a shield of some kind. But even as he drew near the figure on the bed remained asleep and restful.

He was lovely when he slept, Tom was, and Harry had to laugh at himself for such a thought. He was tired of ignoring that as well. Tom was pretty. He had been nice to Harry. And maybe not all of it was true, but he knew some of it must have been.

It took a few more seconds for Harry to gather his nerves enough to pull back the blankets on the bed and slip in, inch by slow inch, until he was laying down next to Tom. Luckily his bed was also bigger, Harry was able to snag a fluffy pillow that Tom probably never used, tuck his wand underneath it and settle into the plush down all without disturbing his unknowing companion.

Tom was warm beside him. Warm and safe. The pain in his chest that had been present all day began to fade as Harry dozed off easily for the first time in over a week.

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The wards on the door alerted Tom to the presence of someone nearby. They fizzed under his skin as the door was opened. He

gripped his wand tightly, his hand under his pillow, ready to hex whoever dared enter his room uninvited.

Until a small shadow filled the doorway. He forced his hand to relax, even as his heart began to beat so frantically it hurt.

Harry.

He closed the door and crept slowly to the bed, not making a sound. A part of Tom wanted to rise and ask what was wrong. A bigger part of him just wanted to see what Harry would do if left to his own devices. So Tom closed his eyes before Harry reached the bed, evened out his breathing and feigned sleep.

Several long, agonizing seconds passed and nothing happened. He was just about to break the ruse when, oh so slowly, Harry slipped into his bed.

Harry Evans was in his bed!

Tom couldn't explain the warmth, the joy he felt at that.

Harry didn't hate him.

Harry wanted him. Needed him!

With careful movements Harry took one of Tom's pillows and snuggled it close. It was torture, but Tom waited until Harry's breathing evened out before opening his eyes to behold the sight. Harry, in his bed, hugging his pillow. One of his hands rested, open and inviting on the bed between them.

Just slow as and careful as Harry had been, Tom inched a hand across the bed. Harry's was smaller than his. The tips of his fingers cold, even though his presence filled Tom with the same warmth as always. In the low light Tom couldn't make out the scars he had seen on them before, though here and there he could feel their presence, their raised outlines on his smooth skin. And in that moment, as clear as day, Tom realized he never wanted anything to happen to that hand again. The thought was so right, so true, it was like remembering something he had known all along.

Harry Evans was precious to him. And above all things, Tom needed to make sure he was happy and safe.

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovelies!

This is so soon after the other, I know! But what can I say, the muses sorted themselves out a bit. I'm seeing the shape of the story a little better now, as this last scene has finally made it into the fold.

I'm not a huge fan of angst so I'm rather happy to end on a fluffy note. Can't wait for more fluff to come! Hope you guys are also looking forward to the fluff fest!

We'll get some more Dumbledore later on. I haven't forgotten about him.

I actually did try to look up the history of sherbet lemons to see if they had been around during the 40s and all I kept getting was Harry Potter lore...turns out lemon drops were made in 36 and since I like those better anyway, we get those instead!

I'm looking forward to some soft plots coming up. And some excitement after that!

Thank you guys so much for your support, your great comments and bookmarks and kudos! It means the world! And is probably why this update happened so soon
(◡‿◡)

I'll see you all again

NEXT TIME!

the morning after

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Tom is determined to make everyone else see how special Harry is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 8

It took a while for Harry to figure out what had woken him. He had been sleeping so well. So deeply that he hadn't even dreamed, just one minute he had been awake and the next he was being pulled from sweet slumber by....what was it?

There were a few things that stood out as 'wrong' in his hazy state. The pillow he rolled his face into, chasing after sleep, was too soft and big to be the one he had been using lately, it also held a scent that was not his own. Though it was familiar, and nice. And though the blanket that covered him did not feel as heavy as the one he had grown used to, he was still very warm.

But none of these things are what woke him. There was some sort of pressure on his hand, something holding it, tickling movement over his palm, feather light but insistent.

He opened his eyes and...he was not alone! He was also, not in his bed. Tom lay across from him, dark eyes regarding Harry as he slept, between them on the bed their hands lay intertwined. Tom's long fingers cradling his hand as his thumb brushed lazy strokes across his palm. It never faltered, not even when Tom smiled upon seeing that Harry was awake, or when he greeted Harry with a soft and casual, "Good morning."

Harry pressed his face into the pillow to both hide his blush and growing smile. He was in Tom's bed! He had actually done it! And judging by Tom's light mood, and that he hadn't been hexed or tossed out, Tom was rather happy with the situation as well. Tom squeezed his hand, drawing Harry back out of the pillows to face him once more.

"I missed you." Tom said softly. It was so open. So honest. Almost, Harry felt the words as tangible things. Tom had missed him.

"I missed you too." He said with a hesitant smile. Maybe he should feel silly to say it. Embarrassed or worried about giving too much away, but he did not. Several things had fallen into place last night. He could not forget his past, would never dream to. His friends had always been what sustained him through trying times. But he couldn't rely solely on their memory anymore. He had an opportunity for a real friendship here and now, for something more if he were willing. He wanted to take it.

They didn't say anything for a time. Harry was still tired, the rest he'd gotten the night before hadn't nearly been enough to make up for lost time. But this was nice. Laying next to Tom, warm and drowsy. It felt very much like their shared dreams. Easy. Comfortable. Right.

Slowly the light changed around them. Murky grey fading to glittering sea green. The sun was rising. Had risen? It was time for them to start the day. "I should probably-" Harry began, sitting up. He didn't let go of Tom's hand.

Tom didn't rise with him, simply laid back and watched Harry with a smile and bright eyes. Harry squeezed his hand, relished the weight of it, the realness. He didn't want to leave.

He didn't want to explain his absence more though. Alphard would probably have a heart attack if he found out Harry hadn't been in his dorm.

Speaking of.

"Tom?"

"Yes, Harry?" Tom said, smiling still. He lifted their joined hands off the bed and rested them on his chest.

Harry leaned forward and fixed him with a serious look, "Did you punish Alphard because of me?"

Tom blinked at him for several seconds, "Harry-" he started but Harry cut him off quickly.

"You did, didn't you? You gave him detention because I fell asleep in class. He didn't do anything."

“He was tasked with making sure that you made it to and from your classes,” Tom said empirically, “As a Prefect he-”

“Did he break a school rule?”

“I...well, no.”

“Did he break a house rule?” Harry asked with a triumphant grin.

“Not exactly....?” Tom said, a little unsure now.

“Not at all!” Harry shot back, “he broke one of your rules,” he said, poking Tom’s nose with his free hand, “One of Tom Riddle’s, ‘I have to control mine and everyone else’ lives’ rules.”

Tom snatched at Harry’s hand but he was too quick, his little exasperated huff said what he thought of Harry’s antics and the glare he was giving Tom. “You could have gotten hurt.” He said simply. In the flowing dawn light he looked paler than usual. His hair, no longer perfectly kempt, curled wildly on the pillow. He had never been so open, so true, before. Like before, Harry could almost feel the raw emotion of such a statement.

“But I wasn’t,” He said gently, Tom’s hand was warm in his own, the thumping of his heart in beat with his own, “and if I had been it would have been my own fault. No one else’.”

Tom sighed, his eyes closing as he clearly thought about it, “Fine,” he said, after a short pause added, “As of now his punishment is absolved. I’ll let him know before this afternoon.”

“Thank you,” Harry smiled brightly down at him.

Tom returned his smile, though there was a twist of humor in it, “Is that it?”

Harry rose an eyebrow at him, “I don’t-”

“You wanted to plead for Alphard’s release from detention but not your own?”

“Oh,” his cheeks heated a up a little in embarrassment. The truth was he had come to acknowledge that he had, in fact, broken a pretty important rule. The rule might have only been made by Tom to keep the house in line and under his rule, but if he had been caught sleeping in class by a teacher he would have been given detention

anyway.

“No matter,” Tom said lightly, “I wouldn’t have relented on that anyway.”

“Jerk,” Harry said crossly, though there was no heat in the statement, he smirked as Tom made a show of being affronted. The silence stretched between them, suddenly feeling a little out of sorts under Tom’s gaze, Harry made to leave.

“Wait!” Tom grasped his hand harder, frantic, as he sat up on his elbows. He took a deep breath, as though to steady himself, “Have breakfast with me.” It wasn’t exactly phrased as a question. Tom Riddle didn’t ask things of people, he made demands and they were met. But this was different. He was unsure, hesitant. Worried, perhaps, that Harry would deny him.

“Sure,” Harry said, smiling wide at both the sudden flush of warmth through him and the expression of utter relief that flashed over Tom’s face. Before he could think too much about it, or talk himself out of it, Harry leaned forward and placed a quick yet tender kiss on Tom’s lips before jumping off the bed and scurrying to the door. Tom’s low chuckle following him until the door was firmly closed between them.

Harry took a moment, leaning against Tom’s door to catch his breath. A part of him couldn’t quite believe he had gone through with it all. Bridging the gap that had formed between him and Tom over their argument had just felt....right. His days had not been the same without spending his nights with Tom. Alphard was great, and the rest of the house was nice enough to him...But Tom’s absence had been like an open wound. Painful. Impossible to ignore.

Kissing Tom had not been part of the plan. Neither truly had he thought to plead Alphard’s case, but then the moment had come and well, there was no reason not to. He has spent the night sleeping next to Tom in his bed, gone was the time to be bashful over speaking his mind. The fact that Tom had been so agreeable was still something a surprise. But maybe he was also feeling the loneliness of the rift. For a while now Harry had thought that maybe their shared nights were as much for Tom’s benefit as his own. It was nice to have that confirmation.

After a few deep breaths to steady his nerves Harry pushed off the door and headed to his own room. Not wanting to think about explaining why he was standing outside of Tom’s door in his night

clothes if anyone should peak out into the hall at that moment.

And he would really like to get a shower in before he had to face Tom's friends at breakfast.

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There wasn't much that Tom could do right after Harry fled from the room, the glowing warmth that he had woken with, that only grew as Harry touched him, kissed him, short as it was, left him feeling light and oddly disconnected from himself. Tom had never felt as alive as he had in those moments. Everything was bright and clear and perfect.

Halfway through his routine Tom became aware of the ridiculous grin still on his face. It took longer than it should have for him to control his features, once he was sure that he was collected, properly, only then did he leave the room. He made it to the Great Hall in good time, seated himself at the head of the table, and waited.

The slow trickle of students proceeded as normal, perhaps a little more bleary eyed due to the festivities of the night before. There were certainly far fewer requests made of him than usual, only the most studious Ravensclaws forewent celebrations in favor of homework and scheduling.

His Knights trickled in in twos and threes, often being trailed by younger students. Children with potential and the right kind of ambitions and connections. They had a set routine by now, a rhythm. Rosier sat to Tom's right, as usual, at some point Abraxas had made it his goal to always be on Tom's left. A self imposed hierarchy in their group that Tom had seen no reason to counteract. Until now.

Tom held a hand out over the plate to the left, forestalling Abraxas as he made to sit. "You will be sitting one down today," Tom said airily, and nothing more.

"I..." Abraxas halted, blinked clear blue eyes at him, then straightened, "May I ask why, Tom?" The inflection on, Tom, was subtle, but there. Respectful, but wary.

"Harry Evans will be joining us for breakfast today," and lunch and dinner for that day and the next, if Tom had his way, "You will make

room for him.” He could be no clearer in his meaning. Harry was going to be enfolded in Tom’s inner circle, and the others would make room. No discussion.

Abraxas’ expression twisted, darkened. He did not even fight to correct it, to hide it from Tom and others as he tried to hide how the mention of Harry usually set his pristine facade on edge. He took the seat next to the empty plate that was now Harry’s and brooded.

It was sometime still before Harry walked in, Alphard at his heels. But oddly, any irritation that Harry, who had left to get dressed at the same time Tom had, yet managed to arrive to breakfast so much later than himself, vanished upon seeing Harry, cheeks slightly flushed as he smiled down at Tom.

“Good morning, Harry,” Tom motioned cheerily to the empty seat, “sit down.”

“Good morning,” Harry said as he sat, after casting a look around, all of Tom’s Knights eyeing the situation curiously, Harry added, “er...everyone.”

“Alphard,” Orion’s voice cut through idle chatter around them like a knife, Alphard’s attempt to sneak away from their group stopped short, “sit down.”

“Yes, Alphard, do join us as well,” Tom smiled at him with just a hint of teeth. Harry may have agreed to this one meal, but if Tom wanted him to feel comfortable around the other Knights having Harry’s friend around would only help. To Abraxas’ obvious displeasure Alphard squeezed himself onto the bench between him and Harry.

For a time the table was silent. The Knights hardly moved as they observed Harry and Tom. Tom handing him a cup tea and making small talk about class. Harry, unsuccessfully, trying to bring Alphard into the conversation. Finally a Hufflepuff came over to ask for Tom’s help, their ditsy aunt had forgotten to send their Hogsmead form and they were afraid of not having it in time to present to their head of house. Though Tom didn’t really have the authority to make them be allowed to go, he could at least promise to speak with their professor on their behalf.

After that the others seemed to settle into this new arrangement a little more. Conversation picked up, even if there are still glances, and in a few cases, glares, thrown at Harry. Tom could demand they compliance. Tell them they must give Harry respect. But issuing such

an order would only be met with anger and resentment. It would sow seeds that would later bloom into mutiny. Abraxas was not the only one who did not want Tom's interests to steer towards Harry,

No, he needed to make sure that they came by their respect and admiration naturally. As Tom had. Already a plan was forming. Something, once seen, no one would be able to deny Harry's place at Tom's side.

He felt oddly unfocused all day. His mind either racing ahead to putting his plan in action, or lingering on the kiss that Harry had given him that morning. There hadn't been time to talk about it. To reciprocate it. There will be time later, a part of him knows. Plenty of time to speak with Harry and bask in each other's presence.

Tom had never had such a hard time being patient before.

At lunch Harry and Alphard decided to celebrate Alphard's new freedom by flying for a while after dinner. Something that Tom was more than willing to let happen. Harry had sat next to him on his own, without prompting or asking if he would be welcome, so Tom was feeling rather generous. It also meant that Harry was a little late to the common room giving Tom plenty of time to set his plan in motion.

Tom was already firmly ensconced in his usual place at the head of one of the study tables, lending an ear here and there where he was needed, when Harry and Alphard bustled in, disappearing into the dorms just long enough to deposit their brooms and gather their school work. Tom ducked his head to his own work when he heard them approach the study area, the seats closest to him were taken, but there were a few empty further down. He grinned to himself as Harry and Alphard took seats halfway down the table.

Perfect.

He couldn't be seen to have a hand in what was to come.

Before the room had filled with students eager to get their homework behind them, Tom had taken Gemma from her post and, after a few whispered words to her, had set her on one of the study tables. She was now making way up and down the table, hissing words of encouragement to the busy and often frustrated students. And even though they could not understand what she was saying, the looks of gratitude and thankful pets she received spoke for themselves.

And only served to bolster her in her ‘helping’.

It wasn't long before she had realized Harry was at the table and singled him out. She loved him best of all, she had told him so as Tom divulged his plan to her. He was not surprised that she wasted no time in reaching him then. She paused in front of him, raising up to look at him directly. She was too far away for Tom to hear what she was saying, and the only indication that Harry had heard her was a flick of his gaze as he tried to scoop her off of his work. A few of Harry's neighbors laughed at his struggles until Gemma settled down in his arms.

Tom sat back, pleased with himself and suddenly very content with the world in general. All he had to do now was wait.

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“Moonstones can be used in a pinch,” Gemma said sagely from where she was curled around Harry's arm, “moonstones are good for many things.”

Harry lips twitched, Gemma had been giving him advice on his homework for nearly twenty minutes now. Her little interjections were hardly helpful, but there wasn't much Harry could do to stop them besides setting Gemma down somewhere else....which just felt rather rude. So he bore her interruptions as well as he could.

Even though he was pretty sure that adding moonstone to the mixture in the question would make it toxic. Now curious, Harry flipped through his book to see if there was information about moonstones that would be helpful. Five minutes later, he knew a little bit more about moonstones, but had gotten no closer to answering the question. He turned back to the parchment, trying to refocus.

The question was for a simple healing potion, something that could be whipped up in a pinch if one was in need and, Harry supposed, without their wand. What was giving him difficulty was this, “Imagine that you are injured in the Forbidden Forest in the middle of winter. Using water from a nearby river and anything you can forage from the forest, to concoct a quick healing potion.” Harry muttered the question under his breath. Again. But he still had no idea what to do.

He had never learned what the hell grew in the forest in winter versus any other time of year. Snape certainly had never asked them these sorts of theoretical questions. Always more focused on the making of the potions than instilling knowledge about the individual ingredients and how they might be used in the wild.

“Oh that’s easy then,” Gemma said, evidently hearing what Harry had said. Harry sighed softly, resigned to another oh so helpful tip. “Just brew the berries and leaves of the Amber Ferox bush and drink it.” Her whole body wiggled happily as she said this.

Indulging her only because he had no other ideas, Harry found the plant she was talking about, and...it did say there were healing properties to it. That the berries shouldn’t be eaten but that if made into a tea it lowered fever, the risk of infection, sped up the healing process, and helped rejuvenate ones magic if they had expended too much energy.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Gemma hissed softly, peering at the tomb as though she too could read it.

“You got lucky,” Harry said in exasperation. How could a snake sound so smug? He started writing in the answer anyway.

“You can also throw in a moonstone, for added benefits.”

Harry sighed, but it was far more fond than it had been before, now that that damned question was finally answered, so he said, “you can’t just add moonstone to everything, Gemma, it doesn’t always react well with other compounds, and only enhances the properties of other ingredients on the full moon.” After a moment of thought Harry did add that if the night happened to be a full moon a moonstone could be used to speed the process up. Suddenly he was very happy to have done that little bit of extra work.

Someone close to him dropped their quill, oddly loud as it clattered to the tabletop and rolled away. Harry glanced up to see who had dropped it, only to pause when every eye at the table was pointed to him.

“Wha-” Oh! Oh no! He looked down at Gemma in horror. He had, they had been...

“What?” Gemma asked innocently, her little tongue flicking out to taste the air.

“Harry...” Alphard said hesitantly, “Did...did you just-”

Harry laughed nervously, “Just?”

“He can speak to snakes,” a fourth years across him yelled suddenly, “just like Tom. I saw it!” Everyone began talking then, excited, frantic. Several students turned to try and get a good look at Harry and Gemma. Who basked lazily in their attention.

Harry shrugged at Alphard, cheeks heating beyond his control. “It’s not a big deal.” Except that it was. It had made him a target in his second year. Made people fear him, accuse him of awful things. He had been determined to keep it a secret now, he was new here, he had no one he could really turn to if things became nasty for him.

Alphard’s shocked expressed lasted a few moments more, before breaking into the biggest, brightest smile Harry had seen from him yet. “That’s amazing!” It was the last coherent thing he could make out from Alphard or any of the others as the room seemed to explode around him. Questions flying at him from every angle, hands reaching out to clap his arm or tug on his robes to get his attention. It was all he could do to clutch Gemma to his chest and ride it out.

He didn’t know how much time had passed but eventually he noticed that Tom and his friends were making the others back off of Harry. Orion had Alphard by the back of his robes practically dragging him out of the study despite Alphard’s complaints that he still had work to do. Soft pressure on the back of Harry’s neck drew his attention up.

Tom stood behind him, smiling gently down at Harry for a time, before giving Harry’s shoulder a quick squeeze and walking off to help corral the room.

Why was he so happy? Tom’s initial claim to fame in the Slytherin world had been his ability to speak with snakes. If anything he should be angry that Harry was able to pull out his favorite parlor trick for himself. But that wasn’t what the look he’d just given Harry said.

“What did she say to you?” A first year had, somehow, managed to sneak past Tom and his gang to stand at Harry’s elbow, eyes wide with wonder.

Harry gave him a little smile, “she just helped me figure something out for a potion.” He moved Gemma to the table, she had begun to drift to sleep in his grip and stirred sluggishly on the cool wood.

“Can you teach me how to talk to her too?”

Harry tried to soften his frown, “I don’t think it’s something you can learn, I can just do it...I don’t know how. I’m sorry.” The little boy’s face fell, and for a few painful moments he stood there in silence. Then Harry perked up, “But I can tell her anything you want.”

“Really?”

“Sure! What do you want to say?”

The boy spend a little time thinking, the tip of his tongue poking out of his mouth. “I know! Tell her I think her scales are pretty.”

“Alright, um, what is your name so I can tell her?”

“It’s Kyle,” he said excitedly, leaning over as close as he could get as Harry roused Gemma enough to give her the message.

“She says thank you and that...she likes the way your hair sticks up in the back.” Kyle had some rather impressive golden curls, Harry had to admit.

He smiled up at Harry, “can you tell her something else?”

“I...suppose...” That was how Harry found himself surrounded by first and second years, who were evidently immune to the rule of letting Harry do his homework in peace. Everyone had something they wanted to tell Gemma, all of it usually about how lovely they thought she was, which of course she ate up, preening for everyone on the table next to Harry’s forgotten books.

Eventually Harry found himself yawning, the group around him hadn’t grown any smaller, but the noise in the common room had quieted down. Harry stretched, groaning as his back popped loudly. “Okay,” he said over the chatter of his small group, “I think that’s it for the night.” There was a chorus of ‘No!’s as Harry rose and began gathering his work.

“We can talk with Gamma tomorrow, alright? It’s time for bed now.” Harry slung his bag over his shoulder and scooped up Gemma, ignoring the groans as the kids shuffled out of the study area and to their dorms. In his arms Gemma twisted lazily.

“I wasn’t done yet,” she hissed pitifully.

“Yes, you are.” He placed her on her perch where she curled up on her heated rock, “you’re such a drama queen, aren’t you?”

She blinked her luminous eyes at him in thought then said, “yes,” and curled up on herself to sleep.

Laughing softly Harry turned to head to bed, he didn’t get very far before a curt, “Evans,” drew his attention to the fire. Abraxas sat alone, perched on one of the large chairs by the fire. It must have been later than Harry realized if the rest of Tom’s crew had already left for bed.

“Malfoy,” Harry said, taking a hesitant step towards the fire. He had kept his distance from Abraxas so far, he tugged on Harry’s heartstrings in a similar fashion as Alphard. It was like looking at a carbon copy of Draco....only, perhaps, a little taller. Abraxas’ hair was longer, more like how Lucius Malfoy wore his. It didn’t matter that Harry had few pleasant memories that involved Draco and his family, seeing someone just like him still hurt a little.

“So,” Abraxas said, his pale eyes raking up and down Harry’s form in a way that had Harry itching for his wand, “that’s why Tom is so interested in you.”

“Pardon?”

“The trick with the snake,” Abraxas said, crossing his legs as he relaxed back into the over-sized chair, “it was impressive, I have to say. If a little contrived.” His scowl deepened, his lips twitching into a ugly sneer.

Harry simply blinked at him. This guy was mad. “Okay...you’re having some sort of episode,” Harry said, taking a step back, “I’ll just leave you to it, then.”

“You aren’t fooling anyone, Evans.”

Harry signed out, what was it about him that set every Malfoy in history off? He looked back over his shoulder and shrugged, “Well that’s good, I guess.” He wasn’t really trying to ‘fool’ anyone. Well, other than wanting them to believe he was from this time and all the lies that implied. Parsletongue hadn’t really been part of that. It wasn’t like someone could figure out he had been displaced from his time just because he could speak to snakes. He felt relatively sure that Abraxas was just being a dramatic Malfoy.

Hah, a dramatic Malfoy.

That was like saying a cold snowflake, or a hot cup of tea.

They seemed to be incapable of anything else.

Harry didn't hesitate in the hall. Made sure to head straight to his room without pause. He'd had plenty of time to think about it, he didn't need to physically be in the room with Tom to get some sleep, to join Tom in his dreams. So he headed to dorm and got ready for bed.

It was...a little more difficult than that, though. He wasn't the only one still up, eyes followed him as he crossed the room, as he brushed his teeth, as he hung up his robe and crawled into bed. He pulled the curtains around the bed with another tired sign. Their stares hadn't been malicious, not like Abraxas and his sneering. No, they were just curious about Harry's new...gift? Talent? As the first and second years were. The only difference was that they were taking whatever warning Tom had given them to heart.

Harry's lips twitched at the thought that the first and second years had no real fear of their great Head Boy, and saw fit to go against his orders. The great Tom Riddle, nothing more than glorified babysitter. He fell asleep with a smile on his face, only to open his eyes a second later to sun a drenched meadow.

It had been so easy to fall into the warmth that meant Tom's shared dream. Now that he knew how to actively ignore it, it was so obvious where the connection had been. It had never been something he had wanted to poke at before, but Tom wasn't Voldemort. Leaning into the connection, the, whatever it was, that existed between them, filled Harry not with fear, but with peace.

Tom was there, of course, smiling at Harry. looking for all the world as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Just another night. Life as usual. Isn't it a lovely evening?

Harry threw a pillow at his smug face.

"Harry!" Tom scolded, though he was unable to keep his amusement from his voice, "such barbaric behavior. Really, I should be rethinking this friendship."

Harry snorted, friendship, sure. He crossed his arms over his chest and did a much better job of pretending to be cross than Tom had, thank

you very much.

“How long have you known?”

“Known?”

“About the parseltongue, you jerk! How long.”

Tom smirked, not even trying to act as though he were not guilty of such a thing. “Since the first night of school.”

“Wha-” Harry sputtered, “How!” Then with a gasp he breathed out, “Gemma!”

Tom just kept smiling that serene smile at him.

“I should have known...she’s such a...a...a blabber mouth!” He tossed his hands into the air with abandon. The little sneak, of course she was whispering in Tom’s ear. She probably loved him.

“She’s exceptionally fond on you, you know.”

Harry blinked at him, taken a little aback by how close Tom’s statement came to replying to his thoughts. With a vicious shake he put that notion out of his head. It was bad enough...or good enough? That he and Tom could share dreams, he didn’t want to add mind reading to it!

“You could have said you knew.” Harry said with a slump of his shoulders.

“You obviously wanted to keep it to yourself. I am not in the habit of making people give secrets they don’t want to tell.”

Which sounded like a lie, Harry conveyed this theory with a glare that did nothing to lessen Tom’s mirth.

“Are you angry with me?” And damned if he didn’t actually sound concerned. Again, what a jerk!

If a frustratingly endearing one.

“I suppose not,” Harry said with a little grin, “this time.” He was willing to set aside that fact that Tom had known and simply kept it to himself, even after they had grown close. It was actually sorta nice, in its own way. Tom realizing that Harry had things he would rather not talk about...except.

“Is that the only reason you started talking to me in the first place?” Harry asked with a scowl.

“Well, not the only reason,” Tom answered smoothly, “it certainly added to your,” he cocked his head thoughtfully, “appeal. But there were other things about you that caught my attention.”

Harry grinned widely, oh was there, now? “Like what?” He asked, scooting a little closer to Tom on the blankets. “Do tell.”

With a roll of his eyes Tom sighed, “it is unbecoming to fish for compliments, Harry.” But Harry just kept smiling up at him until he finally got what he wanted. “Fine, if you insist.” His tone may have said that he was just humoring Harry, that he found such things as confessions of the heart worthy of lower humans only. Yet the way he shifted just a hair closer to Harry, the slight pinkening of his pale cheeks, spoke volumes.

“It is intriguing whenever a new student comes to the school so late in their education. We’ve lost more students than we’ve gained due to the war. You were something of a curiosity, and I took it upon myself to make sure you could navigate the school and Slytherin House in one piece.” After a pause he added, “As I would have done for anyone.”

That was mildly disappointing, Harry pouted harder, though that time he had honestly not meant to. It did have the benefit of eliciting another sigh from Tom before he continued to speak.

“Then you showed up in a seventh year class.” Tom’s lips twitched into a fond smile, “That, as far as I know, has never happened before. Consider me suitably impressed.”

Harry smiled at the praise, though it quickly faltered. There were reasons that he was above and beyond his year in defense and the tale was not a pleasant one. Loss and uncertainty panged in his chest. With it came the familiar fear of the future. Of a world that relied on him. Friends and strangers who had put all their hopes on his shoulders. All things he had worked so hard to forget, to live around, cropped back up in such a short amount of time.

There were hands on his face, lifting his gaze back to Tom. He hadn’t even realized he had looked away. Everything coming back so suddenly had just been a bit overwhelming. Nothing he couldn’t come back from. He was a pro at pushing down unpleasant thoughts and unwanted feelings. Harry was ready to get to it, to apologize for

zoning out when Tom had been belittling himself to say nice things about him.

But Tom's eyes were dark and warm, liquid amber that glowed a faint red in the perpetually setting sun. The pain that was there, reflected back at him stole Harry's breath, stalled his heart. For a time Tom simply regarded him, long and agile fingers tracing soft patterns on Harry's cheeks, he seemed to be working up to something vast before finally saying.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want."

"It?" Harry had to swallow the lump in his throat before he could ask.

"Whatever it is that always has you pulling away when we talk about the past," Tom said gently, "Whatever it is that causes you so much pain."

And, okay, that hit very close to things he had thought he'd been keeping to himself a little better. Swallowing a lump in his throat, he blinked rapidly to clear the pressure behind his eyes. The small new thing growing between them was one thing. But Harry was not yet at a point where he would be comfortable openly weeping in front of Tom.

He settled on releasing what tension he could through a deep exhale and shaky laugh that he did not feel. "Yeah...maybe some other time." Tom fixed him with an unreadable gaze, there was something sharp about it, and Harry looked away rather than try to figure it out. They might be sleeping already, but Harry suddenly felt immensely tired.

Shifting forward in Tom's hold, Harry leaned in until he was resting with his face against Tom's chest. After a short pause Tom's arms wrapped around him, soft and hesitant at first, then harder. More secure. Smiling, Harry took a deep breath, Tom smelled like sandalwood and something infinity light and sweet that might just be part of the dream itself. "I'm just going to rest for a little while, okay?"

"Take as long as you need," Tom said gently, shifting until he was leaning on something, probably more dream pillows, Harry didn't feel like opening his eyes to see. Instead choosing to focus on how nice it felt to be cradled in Tom's arms. How soothing the gentling shushing of the stream was. It was easy to fall asleep, feeling lighter and happier than he had in days.

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Tom had never felt so much in his entire life!

How did Harry stand it? How did he not explode from all of the emotions that raged through his body?

No wonder he was so tired all the time! Was he perhaps so small because his body was working over time to compensate for everything going on inside him, that it was eating up all his energy before it could be used to help him grow?

No...no, that was simply ridiculous. That wasn't how the human body worked, Tom was just overrating. Not that he could be blamed. Being next to Harry always did something to his emotions, to him in general. Made him feel better....whole. He could not fathom why, had not yet found an answer in any book. There wasn't much he could do other than enjoy the pleasant sensations of being near Harry. Then, this.

Touching him amplified everything ten fold. Touching him when he was suffering some sort of internal pain. Tom had not been ready for it. How it cut like a physical thing. He was so sure that if he looked he would find an actual wound on his own chest. Fear and agony beyond anything Tom had ever felt. And Harry had looked the same as he always did when his past was brought up.

Was this what he went through every time someone asked him about where he was from? How could someone keep going through that? How could someone go through such torture over and over and yet turn out as gloriously bright as Harry?

Tom had to take a deep breath, force himself to centre and calm. Harry was sleeping soundly in his arms, face peaceful, the current of emotions that Tom was sure were not his own had settled and were quite....pleasing.

He had already realized that he needed to keep Harry close. Needed to be there to protect him. To make sure nothing in life ever hurt Harry again. But in that moment something inside Tom twisted, fell into place, and solidified. A fundamental part of him shifting and changed. He had not even realized it was there, hadn't noticed that there was a place inside him that had been empty until it was full with great

purpose. Tom would not only make sure that Harry was happy and taken care of. He would tear down the world to make it so.

## Chapter End Notes

HELLO LOVES!!!

I hope everyone enjoyed this chapter, the next one is well on its way, which is odd for me, to have anything written in advance when posting. But I do! So hopefully the next chapter is out soonish.

Now I feel like the real fun is going to begin, as our boys are beginning to deal with and accept their feelings.

And poor Tom!! He's never experienced anything like what Harry feels before!! It's overwhelming. But it could only be a good thing for him to start having empathy towards others.....or at least, towards Harry.

Right?

I'm really glad so many of you enjoyed the fluff from last few chapters, and I hope you're ready for a whole boat load of more!! And to the ones who, for some reason, did not want or expect this to be a happy love story between our boys....I'm not sorry, it's in the tags. (Healing, eventual romance) I've added more tags (fluff, happy ending) just because if there was confusion, I want to make sure there isn't anymore.

The plant Harry is talking about for the potions question in holly...in the holly bush family at least, it's been weeks since I did the research, but it's holly berries, essentially.

I'm looking forward to the next couple of chapters as the plot picks up. As I took a look at the scenes I wanted to do I realized that this is maybe only halfway over. Give or take.

Gemma loves her adoring little snakes. She's going to enjoy having Harry as a translator!

I can't think of anything else to add to this chapter. Let me know what you think. And thank you guys so much for your support. Nearly 3k kudos and over 1k bookmarks!!! I hadn't been paying attention to the stats, but you guys are crazy!! I'm lucky to have you as readers!! (Sorry for not always getting back to comments I'm going to do better. I had "Unread" Comments from like five



years ago, something like 2k altogether, but I cleaned out the inbox and it'll be easier to keep track of now!!!)  
for those that might be interested I have started working on a longer version of [Returning Home](#) (ABO Post apocalyptic AU, where after Voldemort's fall after trying to kill Harry, the Death Eaters rise up and take over the world. It'll start from the very beginning and the first chapter should be done soon. If anyone is interested I made a series page that the new story will be added to [here](#)

Stay tuned for  
NEXT TIME!!

Tom and Harry are very cute together! Much cuddling, many fluffs!

And things start to get rocky in Slytherin House.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## Chapter 9

“All I’m saying,” Harry said as they walked the silent halls alone, the torches sputtering in the cold breeze from several open windows, tugging at Harry’s dark green cloak so that he had to pull it closer to his body, “is that you keep her distracted with something long enough for me to burn the papers. Accidentally, of course. Will she be mad? Sure. Will she get over it? I sincerely hope so, but she’s so batty who knows.”

Tom laughed softly, with a sweep of an arm, he pulled Harry into his side, wrapping his own cloak around Harry’s shoulders to share his heat. Harry huffed, evidently wanting something else than laughter and a hug for his ludicrous idea.

The last several days had been a special sort of bliss for Tom. After Harry woke up in his arms Tom had worked up the courage to finally return the kiss Harry had bestowed upon him that morning. Only where Harry’s had been swift and chaste, Tom took it upon himself to go slow, to convey emotions and intents that he had only ever pretended to feel before. There had been enough time before their need to wake that Tom took his time, relishing in Harry’s flushed cheeks and stuttered breaths by the time he was finished.

Things had been, understandably, different after that. There wasn’t much time or opportunity for them to be alone in the waking world. And Tom wasn’t quite ready for the rest of the school to know about their relationship just yet. The small rumors were one thing, actually confirming it would bring more attention down on Harry. Something Tom viscerally wanted to avoid. He would not make any public step forward without Harry’s consent.

But moments like this, when they were completely alone, Tom indulged the part of him that wanted to hold Harry close, make him smile. Make him happy.

So Tom said, “She might be old, but you should not doubt her

reflexes. The second she senses a fire she'll be there putting it out. You wouldn't get more than a handful of papers destroyed that way, and on top of which she would probably give you more detention for setting her precious files alight." Trying to be the reasonable one.

Harry took his reason and turned it sideways, "So you lure her away, out into the hall or another room. I say a candle fell over when I wasn't looking. I stepped out to the loo and came back and everything was on fire! I saved what I could and we just chalk the rest up to tragedy." He beamed, hopeful, up at Tom.

Tom sighed dramatically, "and how, exactly, am I to 'lure' her away?"

Harry pressed a slender finger to his lips in thought, "hmm, you tell her there is some sort of emergency in the hall...like a troll or something has entered the school."

"A troll?"

"It could happen," Harry said in soft defense.

"It's very unlikely for a troll to enter the grounds on its own, let alone the school itself."

"Well," Harry said snappily, "you think of something."

Tom stopped before the door, taking a moment to ponder before grinning down at Harry, "how about," he began, speaking low so that Harry had to lean into him to hear, "we go in and I help with the second year pop quiz scheduled for tomorrow and you spend an hour and a half sorting through a hundred year old papers, hmm?" Tom had to laugh at Harry's look of utter betrayal, bestowing a little kiss on her forehead to soften the blow.

There was such an interesting little scar there, Tom had noticed it a few times before when Harry's hair had fallen just so, or when he was sleeping. Placing his lips next to it sent an electric shock down his spine, the world turning almost blinding for a instant, then it was gone. Tom hid his wonder fairly well, he was sure, though Harry looked rather dazed for a moment as he pulled away, shaking out of it only when Tom opened the door, palm flat against the door so that Harry would have to walk under it to enter the room.

"After you, darling."

Harry huffed out a softly vehement, "jerk!" as he walked under Tom's

arm.

Tom lent down before he had passed, lips grazing against Harry's ear as he said, "just one of my many charming qualities."

Harry shivered, slipping past Tom to shoot him a glare over his shoulder, poking his little tongue out at him in defiance. "Not charming at all, actually. In fact, I don't like you anymore."

"Is that so?" Tom asked lowly, stalking a little closer.

"Yes, you're nothing but heartless bully and I don't think I can be your friend anymore, Thomas."

"That isn't my name, Harold."

A resounding, screeching, "Tom!" cut through their joint laughter, pulling Tom back from Harry's space. He hadn't even realized how close they were. That he had crowded Harry up against the filing cabinets. Luckily, Merrythought couldn't see them either. With a quick parting kiss, Tom leaped into action, rushing off to find Merrythought.

The next hour and a half was all second year pop quizzes and planning for a field exam for the seventh year. Tom had promised long ago to not divulge too much of their schedule to his classmates beforehand, but he made sure that his knights were always able to pass the hardest tests without a hitch.

From time to time Tom looked over to Harry, almost neck deep in ancient, yellowed papers. A far away look in his eyes. A part of Tom wanted to take pity on him. Harry, his poor Harry, had fallen asleep on a cool rainy afternoon during a very boring class. Now that Tom was more intimately acquainted with Harry's mood and health, Tom really couldn't blame him for it. He did not eat properly, and Tom knew all too well that without his aid Harry would not be sleeping either. On the other hand, Tom couldn't pass up this time they had together. They may not be alone for all of it, but it settled something in Tom to be able to see him.

It was selfish.

But Tom had never claimed to be otherwise.

"I'm serious," Harry whined as they headed back to the dorm, "there is a family of spiders living in my robes. I can feel them squirming around!"

“You’re just being dramatic,” Tom said lazily. Harry was tucked under his arm once more, even as he fidgeted near constantly. “There are no spiders in your clothes.”

“There are!” Harry insisted, pitifully. “They are going to bite me, eat me all up and then you’ll be sorry for not paying attention to me.”

“Well, it’s your own fault for being small and delicious,” Tom said lightly, “I can’t fault them that.”

Harry pressed himself closer to Tom, muttering something about not being delicious, as he flattened his chest to Tom’s torso.

“Harry,” Tom asked sternly, “are you trying to get the spiders to come over to me?”

“I thought there weren’t any spiders.” Harry snarked up at him, his bright eye gleaming in the low light.

“There aren’t,” Tom said, voice flat, “but that’s what you’re doing, isn’t it?”

Harry blinked innocently up at him, then said, “No....I’m trying to get your robes dirty with all this dust.”

Tom glanced down, and sure enough, his clean robes were now covered in powdery dust. Instead of anger he pressed Harry closer to him. “You’re a brat, Harry.”

“Says the jerk.” Harry said with a contented sigh, snuggling his face into Tom’s chest as they walked.

They stayed that way until they reached the dorm. Separating at the entrance to stow their shoes and cloaks. Harry muttered something about needing a bath before walking off to his room, while Tom simply vanished the dust from his own robes with a lazy wave of his wand. There was still enough activity in the common room that Tom found the need to make a few rounds. Check in on his little flock.

There wasn’t much for Tom to help with. It was far enough into the year the first years had fallen into a rhythm, and the older students were far too excited about the up coming Hogsmead weekend to worry about anything else. Tom settled by the fire once he was done walking the room. Abraxas, Orion, and Rosier were still up, all sitting by the fire, though none seemed to actually be communing with the others. Orion had his face pressed into a book, and Rosier was reading

the paper as Abraxas stared intently into the dancing flames. Cool grey eyes turned to him as he sat among them.

“Finished with your little pet?”

Tom did not show any outward sign of anger at Abraxas’ statement. If he fell into the goading, then Abraxas had won.

And Tom lost to no one.

Instead, sighed before addressing Abraxas like the child he was, Tom said. “Your jealousy is not only tiring, Malfoy, it is beneath you.”

The use of his surname after years of Tom using his first name only, must have been something of a shock, though Abraxas did a good job of acting as though it did not bother him, the narrowing of his eyes and harsh line of his mouth said otherwise.

“And toying around with nameless mudbloods is beneath you, my Lord.”

“We do not know his lineage,” Tom said in exasperation, he had his own theories about that. That perhaps, like Tom, Harry’s mother had been a witch and his father had either been a muggle or a muggleborn. That would make Harry halfblood, if it were true. Just like Tom. “It is clear that he was raised by wizards either way, so your dislike of him based purely on etiquette is distasteful.”

“Wizards,” Abraxas snorted hotly, “not a pureblood family. He most likely comes from the blood traitors who have fled so they do not need to be seen picking sides in the war.”

Tom fixed him with a lazy look of indifference, “shall we simply disregard all who do not come from pureblood families, then? How small will our numbers be if we do so?”

“Small we may be, but at least we will have integrity.” Abraxas bit out, eyes blazing in the low light.

Anger, pure and unbridled coursed through Tom. “Is that what you think you bring to the table, Malfoy? Integrity.” Tom asked, voice a low growl. “You bring a name that can turn heads and enough wealth to assure influence. But you have never brought anything useful to our endeavors.” Abraxas opened his mouth to refute, but Tom cut him off, “name one thing that you attributed that has helped our cause move forward. Besides money.”

Abraxas snapped his mouth shut, scowling for a while before spouting, “As though the others do any better!”

“I frequently supply our Lord with dark tomes and artifacts that will help in our goals, and Rosier brings information from his aunt on Grindlevald’s front line,” Orion said, voice lazy and unaffected as he turned the page in his book, “The Lestranges have invaluable connections in both France and the Americas. Others from lesser known families have also shown their value either through action, or tributes to our Lord.” Orion did not look up as he spoke. It was a succinct overture of events delivered in Orion’s dulcet tones. That fact that all these goings on had completely flown past Abraxas’ attentions was disappointing, to say the least.

“You do not even have the self awareness to properly see the world around you, Malfoy, perhaps I should begin rethinking your place as one of my knights.” Tom observed as he rose, Harry would be getting in the bed soon, he wanted to be there to greet him. “Maybe I’ll find a better fit elsewhere.” Tom cast a look at Rosier before turning and leaving Orion and Abraxas by the fire.

In the hall Tom addressed Rosier as he shadowed his steps. “I need you to keep an eye on Abraxas for the next few days, at least. Especially if he’s ever around Harry.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Rosier’s voice was low, gravelly. He spoke very little, but when he did, Tom was always certain to listen. “There’s something special about him, isn’t there?”

Tom didn’t have to ask who, there could only one person he meant. “There is, Alex. And I need your help to make sure he is kept safe, understand.”

“Perfectly.” Rosier said in his simple way. He stopped at the door to his room, gave Tom a small bow and wished him good night.

At least there were some people who’s loyalty he never had to question.

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Harry woke with a smile on his face.

It had become a a new constant in his life. He would fall asleep and then wake up smiling. It was such an odd, yet pleasant sensation, to not only have something that lightened his days, but that he actively looked forward to. He never expected to have something like that. Almost didn't know how to handle himself now that he did.

For the most part his nights with Tom hadn't really changed, except that they played chess less often, though in the week and a half since Harry bridged the gap between them they had played a few rounds. More often than not they spent the nights curled close, talking of small things. Tom had delved a little into his past, perhaps in a way to lessen Harry's fears towards his own.

It was one thing to know that Voldemort had been an orphan. To learn it as a thing apart. Just another fact about a madman who turned dark in his youth and grew to kill with the same ease that someone else would use to tie their shoes.

It was another thing altogether to listen to Tom Riddle talk about life in an orphanage. Of having to fight for necessities from an early age. Until accidental magic kicked in and he was able to work around a few hardships, such as blankets that were too threadbare to be warm, or how there never seemed to be enough food for everyone. He had known from a young age that he was not quite the same as the rest of the children. Something they had been able to pick up on as well and were sure to make Tom know he was not one of them.

He spoke about having to defend his things from the older children, how before he could defend himself they had taken his things and there wasn't anything he could do about it.

He said it the same way, in the same even tone, that he had used earlier that evening to help a third year practice their spellwork.

Of all the time Harry had been in the past he hadn't wanted to break his cover so much as he had in that moment. He ached to tell Tom about growing up with the Dursleys. Spending his childhood locked in a small closet. always wary that Dudley would strike out. Push him down, hit him, call him names, take his things. All the many, many ways that his childhood had been a nightmare.

But he couldn't. It would open up too many cans of worms and they'd all go spilling out. He kept silent and listened. Trying to lend his support just by being there.

Tom never seemed outwardly effected by these things. He would smile

after something Harry found particularly distressing, laugh it off and keep on as though it were nothing. There was no indication that telling this to Harry, probably the only person he had ever been so open with, was in any way a release for him.

But there was something. It danced along the edges of Harry's thoughts. The little gossamer thread that seemed to connect them. He had never felt it before. Not in the future with Voldemort around, though he had shared a few dreams with him as well. No, Harry hadn't noticed this strange occurrence until he had tried to avoid Tom's dreamscape. Suddenly the connection was there. Almost tangible. And the more that Harry inspected it, the more time he spent with Tom in either the waking or their dream world, the more it seemed it to grow.

Maybe it had been growing this whole time.

Whatever it was, when Tom spoke like this, when they were curled around one another in the perpetually golden, spring-like field, Harry could always feel how unburdened Tom became. Because, if he followed that connection, all the way to the other end of the shining thing between them, there was a presence there, bold and powerful.

Harry was rather sure it was Tom's soul.

He had spent a lot of time in the last week looking at it, so to speak. Not that Harry knew a lot about souls, but he rather thought it was a nice one. It was brighter than he had thought it would be, but then, this was Tom. Wasn't it? He was not yet Voldemort. He was what came before. The calm before the turbulent rage that had always colored the few moments of shared awareness he and Voldemort had experienced.

Tom was Tom. That did not mean he was good. Harry could never forget the diary. The way a Tom, just a little younger than the one he knew now, had tried to steal Ginny's life force for his own.

But, had that really been Tom?

It was too confusing. How could Tom be a book? He was a boy. He was flesh and blood. He had grown and lived an entire life before reigning terror for a time. Blimey he had been in his seventies when he had killed Harry's parents! There was all number of things that could have changed within and without of Tom Riddle to turn him into Voldemort.

Maybe he had just needed someone to talk to.

Maybe Harry was even now diverting the path that Tom would have taken. Just by being there. Just by listening and holding him close. Providing him with a support system he had so clearly needed and had never gotten.

And maybe it was something else altogether. Maybe there was some other turning point down the line. Something drastic that had caused Tom's light, his soul, his essence, to wither and rot.

Harry turned that thought over a few times before soundly setting it off to the side. There wasn't anything that Harry could do for Voldemort and the tragic path he had taken. Other than return to the future and put an end to everyone's mystery.

However the hell he was meant to do that.

There were plenty of things that Harry could do to help Tom now. And if it involved such hardships as lending an ear, being a friendly face whenever he needed, and sharing spare time together, well, that was a sacrifice Harry would just have to make.

For the betterment of the world.

Harry pressed his fingertips to his lips, they tingled with a phantom presence that they hadn't actually felt. In the privacy of his curtained off bed Harry allowed himself a secret and pleased smile. Because.

The part where Harry and Tom snogged each other senseless each morning before waking wasn't for the betterment of mankind. No.

That was just for Harry.

Eventually he rolled out of bed, never much in a hurry to rise and get dressed for the day. It wasn't that he dreaded it. He had just found fewer reasons to rush lately. Things just didn't feel as fast here. It was as though the world had slowed and finally there was room and time to breathe. So long as he was not late to meals and class, Harry couldn't find it within himself to worry too much about deadlines and being on time.

He didn't worry about many things, now-a-days.

But there was a festive, eager air in the room that morning. It was their first Hogsmead weekend of the year and everyone was chatting

with uncharacteristic animation for the hour about what they planned on doing once they got there.

Harry went through his morning routine, vaguely listening to the plans of others as he combed his hair and brushed his teeth.

“What about you, Evans?”

Harry paused, toothbrush in mouth and utter confused. The boy who had spoken to him was one of the many...many...in his year that Harry had hardly learned the name of. He was blond, more sandy than a Malfoy, so he hadn't given it much thought. Dark green eyes and a chiseled jaw. He was handsome in his own right, and Harry had a sneaking inkling that he played on the Slytherin Quiddich team.

What the hell was his name again?

Robert? John? It was something....

“Let him be, Shawn, you know he'll be with Alphard.” Someone else, who Harry knew just as little about, spoke up from the bank of showers.

That's right, Shawn....why did he think Robert?

Not Robert laughed, “That's right, I guess your stuck with your babysitter.”

Harry blinked at him, that seemed an oddly hostile thing to say, he couldn't understand where that was coming from. He rinsed his mouth of, putting his toiletries up with slow care he said, “I like Alphard. What's wrong with spending time with him?”

The boy from the showers propped himself on the sink on Harry's other side, gave an unattractive snort and said, “he's a prefect. He reports everything to the Head Boy.”

Harry couldn't help but look at him as thought had completely lost his marbles. He and Tom weren't kissing in public...yet. He had the very distinct feeling that Tom was waiting on him to get comfortable with the idea before stating anything officially. But they were hardly keeping how close they had become a secret.

“I like Tom too.” Harry said simply, which earned him the laughter of Shawn and his friend. With a sigh, Harry stuffed the rest of his things into his bag and turned to go back into the room.

Shawn and his friend Followed.

“Everyone likes Tom,” Shawn said, “he’s the heir of Slytherin.”

“He’s powerful, even now,” Shawn’s friend said, “most people don’t reach their full potential until they’re in their twenties, and already I’ve heard a few teachers talk about how they feared he would surpass them before he was graduated.”

Harry stopped by his bed, turning to glare to the two as they followed him. “Then I don’t see what the problem is.”

“The problem,” Shawn said, his eyes narrowing at Harry, “is that some people think they can use that influence for their own.”

“Tom likes to look out for his house.”

“He’s very protective of his own kind,” Shawn added, “he looks out for those he deems too weak to take care of themselves.”

“we simply are looking out that he kindness isn’t taken advantage of.”

That was...beyond strange.

Tom Riddle, being taken advantage of? Harry wanted to laugh in their faces. Really? Tom was known for lending a hand when it was needed. Had an oddly, mother hen, approach to the house at large. But the idea that any of that was simply because he was a push over, or someone for whom others could easily dupe, was ludicrous.

How Harry, and even Alphard, played a role in their delusions was a mystery. One Harry wasn’t going to give any thought to.

“That’s sound,” Harry said as seriously as he could muster, “he’s lucky to have you two super sleuths looking out for him. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Harry turned to his wardrobe without further ado. They could either leave or watch his back while he slipped his crimson robe over his head. He really couldn’t care less.

First Malfoy, and now these two idiots. At least it was only the three of them. But it rankled something within him. It seemed, no matter where he went, there would always be someone there wanting to start a fight.

He hadn’t really thought about it since his little run in with those students in the first week. It probably was his association with the

Head Boy that kept them off his back now. The fact that there could be turmoil within his own house hadn't really occurred to him.

Damn, Malfoy. He just had ruin Harry's good time.

Alphard did meet Harry out in the hall, out right bouncing with excitement about their venture later in the morning. He spoke a mile a minute about all the shops they could visit and what they were going to do. Under the impression that Harry had never been to Hogmead before, which Harry couldn't correct him on. He was, of course, looking forward to seeing how it was different. Like the changes in Diagon Alley.

Harry quickly tucked his hands into his deep pockets of his robes to protect them from the biting chill of the halls. It was colder much earlier than he thought it would be. Luckily his new cloaks were cozy enough, though he'd have to go back to the dorm to get it. Because as chilly as the corridors were, the Great Hall was a furnace of delicious heat and tantalizing smells. It was also on this particular morning, unbearably loud.

The excited chatting was near deafening, it echoed through the entryway and down the halls so that Harry was already thinking of turning back for the dorm before he could even see the door. If it hadn't been for the fact that he had told Tom he'd see him at breakfast, he would have. Because finding an inn where he could grab a quick bite sounded better than the havoc that was going in the Great Hall.

Harry pushed his way through the raucous crowd. Hardly anyone seemed to be seated at their tables, the room was a pandimonious flood of brightly robed, excited students who were all determined to out shout each other as they flowed around the tables. The many houses blending into one mass in their shared joy.

It would have been a heartwarming experience, if they weren't so loud Harry feared for his ear drums. He fell into his seat next Tom, a little light headed and already tired. Only to stop in sudden panic. He couldn't hear! He'd gone deaf!

"It's a simple muffling shield," Tom said with a knowing smirk, that Harry was too relieved to have heard him to be mad. From a delicate golden teapot Tom poured a cup of tea and handed it to Harry, "just because they are too uncivilized to behave themselves doesn't mean we should suffer."

Harry took the cup happily. He couldn't agree more, Hogsmead days were always sort of a celebration in his time, but this was ridiculous. Harry observed their end of the table over the rim of his cup. For the most part Tom's closest friend had seemed to accept Harry as a fixture. He received fewer odd looks, and had the all around feel of he was probably being talked about less. Then his eyes landed on Shawn and his friend as they made their way to the other sixth years, giving Harry not quite subtle enough glances as they went.

"Ah," Tom said, for all that he exuded an air of unaffectedness, buttering a piece of toast as though there was nothing else of interest in the world, the little shimmery tether in Harry's chest told a different story. One of annoyance and ire. "Abraxas' friends, Shawn and Calvin Roberts. Cousins, I think."

Harry wanted to slap himself, of course that was his name!

"They aren't giving you trouble, are they?" Tom asked, voice low and sharp edged. Beside him Rosier stiffened before turning his eagle like gaze to the Roberts cousins.

Harry shrugged, "It's nothing." He wanted to put the strangeness of that morning aside. These boys were just trying to rile him up, either out of boredom, or because Abraxas had put them up to it. It didn't even surprise him to learn they were friends. Harry, having taken such a big step away from his own petty squabbles, was able to see their jabbing for the petty power play it was. It made ignoring them in favor of taking the higher path a lot easier.

It was effectively out of his mind by the time the post arrived. The tsunami like wave of owls did nothing to calm the hall down, in fact, the new on slot of screaming cheers was nearly too much for even Tom's muffling charm to dampen.

Harry was just about to make his timely escape when a large, grey owl swooped down and deposited a sizable box onto Harry's plate. The owl itself, so dazzling a shade to be nearly silver, nipped at Harry's hair before snatching up a sausage from a nearly tray and taking to the air once again.

"What....was that?" Alphard said dazedly at his elbow.

All Harry could do was shake his head. He had no answers. He turned his attention to the package, wrapped in a shimmery blue paper with the largest, gaudiest periwinkle bow he'd ever seen. A little card was attached to the front, it simply read 'Harry' in overly looping writing.

He opened it, more a little confused. He didn't know anyone in this time that would send him something.

Other than Ms Cane, maybe. But this really didn't seem her style. She was far too cut and dry to be giving out presents with so many frills.

Harry read the first sentence, and groan loudly.

Yeah...he knew who it was from now.

My Dearest Veela,

I hope that this letter finds you well, dear Harry. Know that I have thought often of our time together. The memories of your beauty keeps me warm in these chilling times. As your radiance inspires me to greater heights of art and fashion.

Which is the reason for my missive. It pains my poor heart to think of you in that drab frozen castle, cold and lonely. And it occurred to me that I had not sent you off prepared for such hardships.

You must forgive Jean-Loup for such carelessness. I must have been struck dumb by your pale, gleaming beauty. The enchanting glow of your jewel eyes. The rosy health of your cheeks, the-

"Dearest Veela?" Tom's voice, a low growl by Harry's ear, pulled at his attention.

"Ah," he floundered for a second, note pressed to his chest in embarrassment, "I'm not a veela."

Something dark slithered over Tom's features, "I hadn't thought you were."

It took a moment for Harry to realize what it was he was sensing from Tom. Dark and all consuming. When he did, he couldn't hold back a snort of laughter. "Your jealous." He hissed in parstletongue.

"Absurd," Tom said, his voice light, though the wiggling worm of jealousy still lingered in his soul.

Harry smiled, handing the letter over for Tom to read, if he wanted, "You don't need to be, he's just a loon who makes cloths. I think he must be this way with everyone." He still spoke in hisses, so as not to embarrass Tom. Though judging by the ill hidden smirks of those around them, they had a better idea of what was going on they would

say.

Harry instead peeled back a portion of the shimmery paper to look within the box. There were several pairs of gloves, dark red, forest green, and fine silky black with dark embroidery, there was even a satiny rose set to match his dress robes. Next to them were a few shaw-like scarves in similar colors, all tucked into a velvet liner.

“What is it?” Alphard asked, leaning into Harry’s side to look in, “Oooh, very nice. Who sent it?”

“Jean-Loup,” Tom read from the letter, “he seems to fancy Harry, here.”

“It’s nothing.” Harry tried to say, but was summarily cut off.

“Clothiers do not make a habit of gifting their wares. They would not make money otherwise.” Tom’s voice was still displeased, obviously losing the battle to remain nonchalant.

Harry folded the box back up, turning to take the letter back from Tom so he could tuck it away and take everything back down to the common room. But the letter was mysteriously gone, Tom’s hands once again busy with his breakfast.

“Right...” Harry said slowly, eyeing Tom, a little smile curving his lips, “He’s just a lonely man with too much time on his hands. Virtually harmless,” Harry rose, hefting the box under one arm. “I’m going to go put this up.”

“I’ll go with you!” Alphard yelled, bouncing out of his seat and to the door.

Before he walked off, Harry paused at Tom side, in Parstel tongue he said, “There’s nothing to be jealous about,” then leaned down and kissed the side of Tom’s cheek. A hush fell over the already subdued Slytherin table. Though Harry felt sure that some of them at least should have guessed the direction his and Tom’s relationship had been going.

But a few steps away from the rest of his house Harry realized it wasn’t just his table who were now reeling from a bit of shock. While the Hall at large was still a cacophony of excited youth, those closest to the incident had quieted. Whispers filling in the echoing space that shouts had once been.

Harry ignored them, marching straight to Alphard with his head held high. Being the Chosen One had a few benefits. Like making Harry impervious to feeling embarrassed by gossip about him.

The racket from the hall seemed to swell the moment Harry was in the entryway. He ignored it in favor of strolling back to the dungeons. Except that Alphard's stare was boring a hot hole in the side of Harry's face.

"What?" He asked.

"You...Tom!" Alphard's smile was so large it must hurt.

"Shut up." Harry said, cheeks pinkening just a little, but in the next moment he couldn't hold back his own laughter. Bumping his shoulder against Alphard's they traipsed back to the common room.

It didn't matter to Alphard if Harry and Tom were getting close. And the knowledge lifted Harry spirits for the rest of the morning.

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The uptick in noise from around them was hardly noticeable through his muffling charm, but the hush that fell over the table at large was something Tom was unable to avoid. He was not, however, about to acknowledge it in any way. As pleased as he was that Harry had been comfortable enough to do what he did. He had not wanted to overstep any boundaries that Harry might have had. He had assumed, and it seemed, rightly so, that waiting patiently and letting Harry find his own footing would reap the best rewards.

Not unlike trying to tame a skittish kitten.

Undoubtedly the surprise from his house, and perhaps the school at large, was due more to the fact that Tom had always been very circumspect when it came to matters of....affection.

In that he had never allowed anyone close to him before. He might flirt a little here and there, flattery was a wonderful tool. But he never allowed it to go beyond that. Any advances made would be politely sidestepped in such a way that never left his would be suitors feelings downtrodden. He might imply that he was simply focused on other

things at the time, one simply did not walk into the ministry and expect a prestigious station to be handing to them. Such things needed to be worked for, and Tom couldn't spare a moment until his plans were met.

This had always worked spectacularly in the past. So long as there was a hint that Tom might one day return their affection, his solitude was seen more as a hurdle than a blockade. His indifference in a person was suddenly a factor of Tom's busy schedule and not a poor reflection on themselves.

The fuss that this would surely stir was almost delicious. Tom smiled to himself, dark and satisfied. Some would certainly see it as a slight to them personally. As they should. Not a one of them could ever hope to stand beside him as Harry could. None were worthy of his time as Harry was. The more they were around each, the more Tom felt that Harry was an extension of himself. Not like an arm or a leg. No. Something far more crucial. Something he could not live without.

His contented mood was no doubt bolstered by the bubbly emotions that were not his own, but he would be more than happy to draw on Harry's joy in the moment. Eating his toast with an unaffected air as the table slowly went back to their conversations.

It did not go without his knowledge, however, that Abraxas moved down the table when he thought Tom wasn't looking, or how Rosier tracked his movements alongside Tom as he went to meet with his little pawns.

"I see what you mean," Alexander said, soft, just for Tom to hear.

"Add the Roberts cousin's to your list to watch." Tom said just as low, pleased at the curt nod he got in turn.

Tom didn't have a lot of time to dwell on anything after the food was gone. Turning his attention to helping eager students to where the carriages awaited them. As always, thanking his lucky stars that first and second years were not allowed on the excursions. It was bad enough having to wrangle the third and fourth years.

By the time everything was sorted out, and no fewer than fifteen rows sorted out, Harry and Alphard were back, waiting next to the last carriage for Tom.

Harry was a vision. Swathed in crimson, a bright rose in the dingy sodden muck of the carriage yard. Then Tom spotted the sleek black

gloves and scarf, and as stunning as they were against the reds of Harry's robes and cloak, they still made his eye twitch.

This, Jean-Loup character was going to have a lot to account for when Tom got a hold of him.

Sending his Harry unsolicited love letters and gifts.

The nerve!

Harry's smile was bright, far too knowing as Tom marched across the soggy earth to them. He made absolutely no response to Harry's amusement as he opened the carriage door and offered him a hand up. Harry placed a softly gloved hand in his own and hoisted himself up into the cab. Alphard moved to step in next, large goofy grin on his face as though he too knew of Tom's inner torment. A growl and fierce glare had him stumbling back a step.

Good.

A much more subdued Alphard climbed in after Tom, shut the door, and sat curled in on himself in silence.

The trip to Hogsmead was a short one, yet by the time they were stepping out onto the cobbled station Alphard had gotten his bounce back, crowding up to Harry to gush about where they should go first.

Harry turned to Tom, green eyes alight with excited fire. The pain to have to let him down was almost a physical thing.

"I have a...meeting I must attend to first." Tom said, taking one of Harry's hands and squeezing it gently, "I will come and find you when it is over."

"A meeting?" Harry asked skeptically.

"It's nothing. Just something I set up with a client from Borgin and Burke's over the summer."

"Borgin and-" Harry's voice trailed off in confusion, but luckily, Alphard came to Tom's aid.

"It's this great shop in London, they have all sort of really old stuff there," he gushed, "Tom's been working there in the summers for a few years, right, Tom?"

Tom sighed, but it was far more indulgent than exasperated. Try as he

might, there was simply no way that Orion would ever succeed in calming Alphard down to what Orion deemed, proper composure. Not that there was much of a need. His name was enough to get him through life. The Blacks were old and powerful enough that having one strange relative wasn't going to see their doom.

"Yes, Alphard." Tom made a show of fixing his cloak over his robes. They were not quite as showy as Harry's. But they were of a fine enough quality. Well made, without being gaudy. "I should not be overly long. Please, enjoy yourselves while I'm away." A shadow moved to his left, and with a little smile he added, "Alexander will keep you company until I can be with you again."

Harry jumped when Rosier entered their little circle, his glowing eyes suddenly unsure, but he smiled all the same. "Er, sure. Hello, Rosier."

"Alexander," Rosier said softly.

"Alex!" Alphard piped in, his bright smile at seeing Rosier fading in the next second though, "Orion isn't going to come with us, is he?"

With a final squeeze to Harry's hand Tom excused himself. Heading off in the direction of the Three Broomsticks. His contact had expressed concerns for Tom's choice in location. But as he ensconced himself in the middle of the room, at the brightest of tables, giving congenial greetings to the staff, Tom couldn't help feel he'd made a good choice.

If one acted as though they were doing something suspicious, then they were bound to attract unwanted attention. For all appearances, Tom was meeting with an old client in need of his expertise in magical antiquity. It was nothing special, it shouldn't take longer than half an hour. And there was no reason that they shouldn't hold such a meeting in a warm and comfortable setting.

Tom's tea had just arrived when his contact, a mister Alvin Byrd, arrived. He was a primly dressed wizard, robes a no nonsense navy with sleek lines and polished silver buttons. His steel grey hair pulled away from his otherwise youthful face, Tom was still unsure if he had simply gone grey at a young age, or if he had acquired something the kept his visage youthful despite age.

He had been tempted to ask, but ultimately set it aside. There was not an item out there that could prolong life. If there had been, Tom would have found it by now. He was not interested in something that would simply make him youthful as he aged. Marching to the grave

was marching to the grave, no matter how one cut it. Death did not care for youth one way or another.

“Mr Byrd,” Tom said with a kindly smile, sweeping his hand to an empty chair, “please, have a seat.”

“Thank you, Tom.” Byrd cast a glance at the room at large before lowering himself to the chair, from a bag at his side he pulled a sheaf of parchment out, clutching it to his chest a moment before handing them over to Tom with slightly trembling hands.

“The..eh...information you were seeking.”

Tom took the papers and sat them on the table next to the teapot,

“Tea, Mr Byrd?”

“I-”

“Don’t look so nervous, Mr Byrd,” Tom said lightly, pouring tea in the empty cup across the table, “I cast a muffling charm over this table. My own device. Anyone who comes by will only hear use speaking of an old hand mirror you wanted a diagnostic spell for.”

“I...I see,” Byrd laughed nervously, “clever. You’re always so clever.”

“Indeed,” Tom sipped his own tea as he casually flipped through the papers Byrd had brought, “is there anything you need to tell me. Complications? Were you seen?”

Learning that they were free from eavesdroppers had done wonders for Byrd’s nerves, his thin shoulders slumped and he reached for his tea with noticeably steadier hands.

“Well, they certainly weren’t easy to come by,” Byrd said, leaning back, the old wooden chair creaking under the strain, “I don’t know if you can call it complications though. There isn’t much out that way. The town, Little Hangleton, is a right nest of muggles. Hardly a trace of magical energy anywhere.” He observed with a bit of incredulity, “I can’t for the life of me understand why a family like the Gaunts would choose such a place.”

“And did they see you?” Tom had turned to what he wanted the most, the photographs. There was a large manor house on a hill, a sprawling cemetery just beneath it. Several pictures accompanied it. Innocuous in their subject matter, yet they caused Tom’s blood to boil. The Riddles, Thomas and Mary, and their son Tom. His father and grandparents. Living as the lords of their own little hamlet while Tom

suffered the indignity of being raised by strangers in a muggle orphanage.

There was list of information on them that Tom could read at his leisure some other time, instead he turned several more pages over to get to the second part of this bundle. Another picture, this one mostly of over grown hedges and waist high grass. Just barely, a figure in dirty brown robes could be seen. His hair, what there was of it, was wild and white, and he appeared to be yelling at the person behind the camera. The name on the paper attached to the photo read, Morfin Guant. Tom's dear, long lost uncle.

"He saw you." It was not a question, and luckily Byrd did not feign innocents.

"Gaunts as mad as a hatter, there's no need to worry that he'll go off telling tales. Can't stand muggles, which is rather ironic, all things considered. He won't be a problem and I can assure you, the muggles did not see me."

"Excellent," Tom flipped the papers back over and folded them before stashing them into his robes, "you will find the payment has been made the next time you visit Gringotts, and, as always, Mr Byrd, it was a pleasure working with you."

"Likewise, Tom." Byrd downed the rest of his tea before making a swift departure from the inn. Tom following at a much more subdued pace.

The sun was out when he left the inn, though it did little to warm the air or dry out the puddles from recent rainfall. And judging by the quickly gathering clouds, it would not last long. It did explain why he found Harry and the other's outside, chatting by a nearby fountain.

Harry spotted him first, perhaps alerted by the same gossamer thread that had led Tom to the fountain. Maybe it was the fragile autumn sun, or the fact that his meeting had gone so well. But nothing in his life had ever felt so perfect, so dazzlingly correct than walking right up to Harry and taking him in his arms.

Harry's laughter was the sweetest of musics, and as soon as he was safe within Tom's arms the sun shone brighter, the air became just a little bit warmer. Looking into Harry's eyes, how the glittered in the light, at the way his cheeks and the tip of his nose were tinged pink from the chill wind, Tom knew it was going to be a wonderful day.

And in a few short weeks, when rest of the castle had either returned home or were caught up in the holidays, Tom would find his way out of Hogwarts and to a small muggle town.

It was time for Tom to meet his family.

## Chapter End Notes

Hello, dears!!! Welcome back!!

I hope you enjoyed the cuddling. And the few steps in forwarding the plot!

I wonder what Tom has in mind with this little family gathering? Probably just a nice dinner, catch them all up on what he's been doing for the last seventeen years. Nothing sinister. I'm sure.

I don't know where the Roberts cousins came from, they were just there, being weird in the showers and suddenly I knew how they fit into the story, so. Enter, Abraxas Malfoy's goons. All Malfoys must have goons. It's in their DNA.

Jean-Loup, sitting at home lamenting that he did not send Harry off with enough warm things for the winter. And Harry just completely immune to love letters since like his fourth year do to the media over the Triwizard Tournament and the subsequent fanmail he received.

Luckily Tom is there to act as a barrier to unwanted attention. And to internally scream in a jealous rage. but only internally. He has a rep to keep.

Now that we have sorted out a few things that needed sorting out, we can move forward!! Things will probably be a bit faster paced....I hope.

Thank you guys so much for your support! I'm so happy so many people love the story, and Gemma in particular. Sorry she didn't show up here, but there is no way she would agree to go to Hogmead. It's cold out there, she is much happier being snuggled by the younger students in their warm common room. I can't think of anything that might raise questions in this chapter, but if you have any, let me know. Thank you guys for reading!! And I'll see you

Next Time!

More love and fluff.

(And undoubtedly other things, but literally my cat is climbing and I can't think through being forced to love him and type this soo....just stay tuned On that note....This might be less edited than the other chapter because CAT!!! ON MY FACE!!! So please excuse the mistakes)



# Chapter 10

## Chapter Summary

DADA physical exam. On a misty night at the Quiddich pitch. What could go wrong?

## Chapter Notes

Shows up a billion weeks later with a new chapter.

Hey guys! Sorry for the delay! I hope you enjoy this!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## Chapter 10

That trip to Hogmead was one of the best Harry had ever had. The sun shone for most of the day, even if it never warmed the air around them or dried up the mud.

Things weren't vastly different from his own time. Some of the shops were gone and replaced with others he had never seen before. Honeydukes was still there though, and a specialty potion store that seemed to be a favorite among the students. Alphard wanted to hit those first, until Rossier said he needed more ink and every objection appeared to die on Alphard's tongue as he stared up and up into Rossier's face.

They ran into Tom after replenishing their ink and parchment supplies, whatever his meeting had been about seemed to have been quick and had gone well. It was as though he brought the warmth of the sun with him as he joined them. Though some of that might have been the arm he threw around Harry's shoulder, how he seemed intent of sticking as close to Harry's side as was physically possible. Which was not something that he was going to complain about. Tom's buoyant happiness was contagious.

Something he would never think to attribute to the one who would be the darkest lord of all time. He couldn't be sure that he had anything to do with it, but apprehension and then giddy acceptance from Alphard gave him hope that Tom was changing for the better. And that Harry was to blame.

Or, er...to thank. Harry was to thank.

They ate dinner at a little cafe that Harry had never seen before, It was a cozy place with warm polished woods and merry fires burning in two large hearths. There weren't many students still around, so for once they had dinner in peace. Discounting Alphard's nonstop commentary on their day, on what he wanted to get Orion and the rest of their family for Christmas, on how he thought he was doing in his own Defense class.

Harry found that he couldn't stop smiling through it all. And as he closed his eye for bed that night, only to open them a second later to Tom, to settle next to him , warm and utterly content in Tom's arm, he had to mark it down as one of the best days of his life.

One of the plus sides of sharing a class with Tom was that he told them whenever they were to have pop quizzes or physical exams. He never said exactly what they would in tale, but just having that extra heads up was no small blessing. So it was that Harry and the rest of the Slytherins were not phased when Professor Merrythought announced that they would be having a practical review in the form of an obstacle course the following evening.

It was the monday after their Hogmead trip and most of the students hadn't quite fallen back into the swing of their classes. But all around Harry, the snakes were calm, some almost giddy.

"Surly you know what's going to happen?" Abraxas wasn't even subtle as he prodded Tom, once again, for information. This time he had hardly waited for them to be out of the classroom do.

"Surly I do," Tom answered smoothly, not slowing his pace, Harry keeping up with his long legged stride mostly fore Tom's hand on his shoulder.

"I bet you've told him," Abraxas said in a low, snide, voice. Probably thinking that Tom would not hear him over the rush of sound around them.

But he had.

"Telling Harry what the trials will be would not allow him to utilize his skills in a way that would be helpful to their growth. Stunting ones development is hardly the way to show affection."

It was more of an admission than anyone was expecting. Or, at the

very least, than what Harry was expecting. His face heated up, he tried to duck away, hide from the eyes could now feel on him from all the others, shocked at Tom's words. But he only managed to lean further in Tom.

"Tom," he tried to hiss out, but it came out much weaker.

"Please don't be upset at not getting the answers, I have only your wellbeing in mind."

Harry couldn't help it, he laughed so hard it nearly sent him careening into Tom. "You're an idiot," though he said it playfully, there was a collective intake of breath around them. He spared a quick glance at the shocked faces of their housemates, before turning to Tom.

Tom smiled back down at Harry, dark eyes shining with amusement, he pulled Harry a little closer to his side, held on a little tighter, "only for you, dear."

~~~~

Rage. It was all Abraxas could feel aside from the disgust. That such a nobody. A nameless war orphan, had wormed their way into Tom's good graces. He was their leader, their hope for a better, brighter future. This boy was not worth the air he breathed, let alone the heir's affections.

Yet Tom held onto him the whole way to the Great Hall, and didn't let go until Harry took his seat.

Abraxas' rightful seat!

Abraxas took a seat next to Rossier, and began to plan. He wasn't without his own talents. Tom would see very soon that he, not Evans, was the one worthy to stand next to him.

All he needed was a little time before their exam to prepare. Then he could show Tom how worthless Evans truly was.

~~~~

The night was cold. Made worse by the fine, clinging mist that pulled and distorted the lights of the torches around them. They had gathered on the Quidditch pitch for their trial...exam. It was an exam. But Harry couldn't shake the foreboding, couldn't stop thinking of another night spent, wracked with nerves and excitement, standing on this very night dark pitch.

The scent of grave dirt, a toxic, shimmering cauldron, and the taste of fear, thick and acid, kept invading his mind.

Warmth at his side, something tall blocking out the surrounding torchlight, Tom's worried face, these things brought him back once more. He was on the same pitch but this was not the Triwizard Tournament. There was nothing within the shrouded enclosure Tom and Merrythought had set up that would hurt him.

There was no Voldemort. No Death Eaters. No one in this time that wished him bodily harm.

Harry took a deep breath, and the world became a little bright and his head a fair bit clearer.

"There's no reason to be nervous, Harry." Tom said softly, worry still creasing his brow.

"I'm not-" Harry cut himself off. What could he tell Tom? The he was not worried about a test. That he feared Tom's future self would step out of a shadow and try to kill him again. Harry sighed, pulling a hand through his tangled wet hair, "It's nothing. I'm fine, really."

"If you're sure," Tom didn't look convinced, but also didn't press. Instead he placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, squeezing gently, "you will be fine, I promise. Someone with your knowledge," he said with a smirk, "I dare say you'll find it far too easy."

Harry nodded, that was the mostly likely outcome. He hadn't been brought low by an in class demonstration since the Bogart, and he had worked hard to get that under control. All he had to do was keep his head about him until his name was called to go through.

Merrythought made her slow, toddling way to the entrance, her voice magicked to make it across the pitch and through the foggy mist.

"Each of you will have a chance to walk through, using the spells and

tactical skills you should have gained in this class to get through. There is no time limit, however, you will be deducted for lagging behind, and should you take longer than fifteen minutes to get through, you will lose one point per minute afterward."

She fixed them each with a hard look, or, all of the ones she could still see through the mist, making sure they understood her pending disappointment if they should fail. "You'll pick your numbers from this hat," she took the hat from her head and gave it a quick shake, little parchment pieces jumping up above the rim for just a second.

They filed up, took a number, and then melded back into the shadows. Well, all except Tom, who drifted to stand next to Merrythought as she continued once every number from the hat been taken.

"Once you have completed your task you can either go back inside, or sit in the stands and watch your fellow classmates as they complete the course. You will not be allowed back through this side of the gate. Don't even try it. Nor will your classmates be able to hear you from the stands, so trying to warn them of the exam ahead of time is pointless. Do you understand?"

At the scattering murmurs of, "yes," she nodded and turned to Tom, "Tom will go first, then we start the count at number two. Be prepared." Without further ado she waded through the soggy grass and disappeared into the stands. Tom waited until he was sure she was in her place to begin.

With the confidence of a king going to war, Tom caught Harry's eye, gave a swift nod, turned to the entrance, and disappeared.

There was no reason to feel more nervous because he was gone. there was certainly nothing in there that could harm Tom. He was...he was the most powerful wizard of Harry's time. And he had help set up this course. He was going to be beyond fine.

Harry looked to his number, sixteen, somewhere in the middle. A pretty good number. Not first, not last, no added pressure. The hardest part now was the waiting.

For the most part it was very boring. They clustered together in threes or fours, trying to keep warm in the ever present chill.

Harry kept an eye on the those going into the course. Making sure he didn't miss his turn. Orion went third, and Abraxas right after him. Followed by a long string of students from the other house whom

Harry did not know well enough to even remember names.

When a tall Ravenclaw went in, number fifteen, he made his way to the front to stand before the entrance. Everything was darkness beyond that point. Some spell overlaid the arch in the hedgerow to keep sight and sound from escaping until it was his time for the next student to walk through. Then, like the rippling of a still pond, the void before him opened, and Harry stepped through to the other side.

It was so similar to the third Triwizard trial that he had to wonder if someone on the committee hadn't had Merrythought as a teacher. The course, which had been too dark to see from the castle, was a maze. Twists and turns that all looked the same. Dizzying. If one were to only focus on them alone.

Harry took a breath, and relaxed. There was a slight breeze off to his right, so that was where he turned. Following it until he needed to turn once more, this time his left. He was several turns in before he got to the first obstacle, a patch of Devil's Snare had woven its way across his path. Harry gave a little flick of his wand, sending up enough fire towards it to get the stuff to pull away from the centre so he could walk through.

First task down, and he had barely batted an eye.

Another turn led him into a room of mannequins, not unlike Jean-Loup's, only instead of wearing fancy robes these held wands and they were pointing them at Harry. He dodged before his mind could fully understand what his feet were doing, while nearly as one all the dummy wizards shot spells where he had been standing.

This seemed a little extreme of a jump from Devil's Snare. But Harry didn't have time to think about why, only to figure out how he was going to best this. There were five mannequins, they stood close together though, sending the same spell at the same time.

With a sharp grin Harry cast his pratonus, instead of sending it crashing through his attackers though, he used the large stag to race around them, corralling them closer and closer together. He dodged another spell, this one leaving a gust of green, smoldering flames behind, and he sent out a knot of thick, snakelike ropes towards the mannequins.

They wiggled together on the ground for a while, too tangled to get up and attack again, but Harry couldn't just stay there and watch, or think too heavily on oddness of this task. Now that they were down he

needed to move on. He didn't want to lose point for tardiness.

His patronus didn't dissipate right away, instead it followed close at his heels as he took another turn, and then the next. On the third turn it raced ahead, knocking...something to the ground....oh!

Harry laughed soft, raised his wand and said loud and boldly, "Ridiculous!" The bogart slunk back into the little chest it had popped out of. Leaving Harry completely alone, his patronus leaving him once it's task was completed.

He couldn't be that far from the centre...It hadn't taken that Ravenclaw girl long to get through, and Harry already felt like he had been walking for ages.

Surprisingly he had found very few obstacles.... had he gone the wrong way?

One turn lead him to a group of Peskies he taunted with flashing lights so he could slip past them, another was filled with bubbling ooze the exact color of bile. Harry neutralized it as well as he could, the spell they had learned, that Tom had helped him with himself, didn't seem to last as long as it should. He had to keep casting it, clearing spots of clean earth for him to walk on. He wasn't sure he made it through without scorching his robes.

He wound up on the other side of the goo panting for breath. That...that was definitely not what they had learned about in class. That was something much stronger.

With the hope that he would be through soon Harry pitched himself forward off the hedge. He still followed the breeze through the twists, the fresh scent of wet grass grew stronger, and Harry couldn't help but relax a little in the hope that it was done.

This had certainly not been what he thought it would. An odd mix of things a child could accomplish next to truly dangerous trials. And a lot of nothing in between.

It was only a long ingrained instinct, that thing in the back of his mind that payed far more attention to his surroundings than Harry ever did, that had him dodging and rolling away from another blast, this one from behind. The whole area before him lit in horrible relief from hot blue flames. But he could still make out five shapes gliding towards him.

Their movements were stiff, cut short and jerking. Five wands in five hands, all pointed at him.

The dummies from before, they had gotten out of his ropes and followed him...he wanted to protest that he had already fought these things! But Merrythought hadn't said that the obstacles wouldn't also be walking the maze. He had just assumed...

Harry pushed himself up, grasping his wand tight, ready to employ a move similar to his last one. Ignoring the part of him that was disappointed that these mannequins were powerful, but not that interesting. Then, they moved.

Two split off on either side, leaving one in the middle directly in front of Harry, and the other's surrounding him.

Not good....

Their movements were still jerky, but they no longer acted as one. Each threw separate curses and spells his way. Forcing Harry to move quick, rolling dodging, and tossing off spells when he could.

There was nothing to hid behind, and no point in using a shield when it would only cover one side.

It wasn't long before he was tired, out of breath and yet still he couldn't stop. One of the dummies had managed to hit him with something on his right arm, it burned. Throbbing from the point it had struck all the way down to his finger tips and over his shoulder. He couldn't see what it had done, couldn't stop or slow down.

But he was slower, had been forced to move his wand to his left hand. His mind working on auto. He cast every spell he knew. Dangerous, wild magic he had never wanted to use. He took one down with the cutting curse. He had needed to use it several times to get through whatever the dummy was made of, but it now lay in useless, twitching pieces. Another was scorched to nothing with strongest spell Harry knew right after fiend fire.

He wouldn't use that...this was supposed to be a school exam, not a life or death mission!

He was still out numbered, exhausted and injured. In a fit of desperation Harry had thrown himself through an opening in the hedge and onto a path he knew did not lead to the exit. He just had to get time to catch his breath, then he could go back in and finish them



off.

And oh god he hoped that this was the last thing he'd have to do. He needed to go to the Hospital wing...and have a talk with Tom about what constituted an easy task.

Something snapped right next to the entrance leading back to the dummies, and Harry was moving before he could even think, wand up, he gasped a deep breath and yelled, "Expecto Patronum," with all his might, at the exact time another voice, low and familiar yelled, "protego!" Then everything slowed.

Through a molasses like flow he watched as neither his, nor Tom's spells coalesced, instead a thin strand of pure white light connected their wands, cancelling out the spells. Their wands refusing to harm to each other.

This was old news for Harry, who was tired, who's vision was fogging over. Who could feel nothing but relief that Tom was there.

the pheonix song began, and the last of the adrenaline that had been keeping Harry up fled. He fell, nerveless, to the ground. Tom's name on his lips.

Before the darkness closed in he was aware of being lifted off the cold ground, cradled next to a broad chest, in arms that made him feel at home.

~~~

Tom took up a spot in the stands after his exam. He would have done so even if Merrythought hadn't asked.

Before, it would have been out of curiosity, seeing who the better fighters were. Who could hold their heads. Who used strategy to get out and who simply barreled through. They were good things to know, for the future, should he need fighters, as he one day feared it would.

It was always a good idea to be to prepared.

When Orion finished he joined Tom, sitting next to him, not

complaining about the damp or the chill. He was good like that. Abraxas returned to the castle when was finished, disappointing, but Tom hadn't actually expected better.

The tasks that had been chosen weren't terrible in nature, other than the roving mannequins stashed here and there, there was nothing in there that a fifth or sixth year couldn't take down. The exam was as much about facing an unknown challenge and fear as it was on practical knowledge.

There were a few who would make great fighters one day. Those who held steady until the very end.

Then Harry walked up to the entrance, and Tom's focus sharpened on him alone. He didn't even watch the Ravenclaw girl as she passed swiftly through the test. All he saw was Harry, back straight, shoulders squared, awaiting his turn.

He looked so much smaller than the others, and even knowing that he was skilled and capable didn't stop the painful uptick of his heart as Harry stepped through.

He passed through the starting point, then, in the blink of an eye, the entire course before them was pitched into total darkness.

Tom was on his feet in a instance. "Professor!?" He yelled at almost the exact time Merrythought was bellowing for him.

"Get down there! I don't know what's wrong...I'll sort it out from this end." She said as she moved down closer to the pitch, all the while mumbling disgruntledly at having the course mess up with a sixth year in it.

Tom didn't stick around to argue on Harry's behalf, he was capable, damn it. Tom had seen it! He wouldn't be in their class if the ministry didn't agree. Instead with a growled out, "Orion," to get his knight to follow, Tom raced down the stands to the exit line.

Getting in was trouble. Merrythought sealed it so that one had nowhere else to go but forward, off the course. Even Tom didn't know the spell she had used to block it off. He might be her assistant but he was also her student and the rules still applied to him. As she liked to point out continuously.

Together he and Orion figured it out, precious minutes in which Tom's palms sweated and his heart would not follow his orders to slow back

down. But once they were on the pitch they still had to go back into the course...another spell more time than they had.

"This one is different," Orion panted, pushing damp hair out of his eyes. The mist was still coming strong and both of them were soaked, "it feels..."

"I know," Tom had felt it too. There was something oily about this spell. The way it kept sliding back into place. It wasn't something Merrythought would do. Not something anyone on Hogwarts ground would do lest they risk expulsion...or worse.

This was dark magic, and it was deliberately keeping him from getting to Harry. "Cover me," Tom said flatly, he didn't even have to elaborate, Orion wove his wand around them, shrouding them from sight. It was possible that no one noticed. There hadn't been many besides himself and Orion who stayed behind, and Merrythought would be busy. Still, he felt better for the darkness.

Tom lifted his arm, pointing at the entrance, "Avada Kadavra," he didn't yell it, simply pushed his anger, his intent. the area before him exploded, a wall of green sparks and smoke. But for all the light there was no sound.

Tom led the way, wand held high as he and Orion traversed the course in reverse . It wasn't long before the sounds of fightings, actual, full force fighting, reached them.

Harry!

"Com on!" Tom sped forward, fully intent to kill whoever was attacking his Harry. Only to pull up short. It was...the mannequins. Only instead of there only being one sending off Merrythought approved seventh level spells, all five of them were there. Three standing, two laying either broken or smoldering on the ground. The one's still standing were casting dark, killing force spells at Harry.

Before his eyes Harry dodged something that looked like a crusiatu, just making it out of the way and into another passage. It had been too swift for Tom to see more, to see if Harry was okay.

He took out the one that had just aimed at Harry with another killing curse, then went right to the next. the last one was taken down with a blast of green light from Orion. Tom gave him a somber nod, he had done well.

"Harry!" Tom called, wand still at ready in case something else popped out or he had to help Harry with another part of the course gone wrong. He wasn't too surprised when Harry, desperate and obviously injured attacked him with his off hand. His eye's were wide, the pupils nearly gone completely, he was moving on instinct alone. Tom cast a simple shield to keep from being bulldozed by Harry's very impressive patronus. But it never came.

Of all the things Tom expected it hadn't been this. For a string of light to flow through his wand instead of the shield. For it to connect to Harry's wand. They canceled each other out somehow.

Then, the music started.

Pure and sweet. He had never heard it for himself, but he'd read descriptions of the pheonix song before.

Oh, how they didn't even compare.

Across from him Harry's expression of fear and determination melted into something far more serene. He lowered his wand and the connection snapped. Then he fell, a smile on his face, and didn't move again.

Tom pulled him up from from the ground, holding him close. He couldn't even remember crossing the distance.

Harry was frozen, his whole right side a deathly white with stark black veins. No time to waste, Tom stood with Harry, small and still in his arms and ran for the Hospital wing. Ignore Orion's questions and Merrythought's shouts as he raced across the misty grounds and biting wind.

It wasn't until later, with Harry sleeping soundly in a bed, the color returning slowly to his face and the black lines marring his skin receding, that Tom had a chance to stop and wonder about what he'd just seen. At what it could mean that his and Harry's wands reacted in such a way.

There was one place he was sure to get a swift and accurate answer.

The next time the nurse made her rounds Tom was ready. She checked Harry's pulse and temperature, tutting a bit at how cool his body was still. "Dark magic on school grounds," she said, part scolding, part horrified, "I just can't believe it."

"He'll be alright, won't he?" Tom asked, he looked at her through his lashes, knowing how helpless he must sound. He was still so disheveled, not even taking the time to wash the dirt and soot from himself yet.

"Yes, dear, he'll make a full recovery in a few days, now that the curse is gone, he just needs rest."

Tom knew that already, he had done his own sort of test, one he had no words, by touching Harry's hand he could feel the curse leeching back to the puncture site and fading away. He still gave the nurse a relieved smile. "Thank Merlin, I was so worried," Tom took up Harry's hand, holding it between both of his. The nurse gave him another fond smile then turned to leave, before she had gone far Tom called after her.

"Excuse, Madam Caraway? Do you think you could bring me some parchment and ink?" It was not her job to do so, but she buckled under Tom's small, unsure smile.

In no time he was writing, hunched over the side table by Harry's bed. Soon he would have his answers.

Soon, he would know a little more about his and Harry's mysterious connection.

Chapter End Notes

Hello again, lovelies.

I am sorry it's been so long. I've been doing a lot of work on original works lately, and only recently had some ideas for fics again. Sooooo we have this.

Thank you so much for sticking with this story. Y'all are still leaving comments even though it's been so long, it brings me a lot of happiness to know that even when I was having trouble finding the words y'all were still there! Thank you again!

I once made my way through a house of mirrors by following the air flow, and I assume it'll work the same way for magical mazes.

Aaaaaand the killing curse now 'kills' curses, cuz...why shouldn't it? It makes sense to me it should be this way XD

So, what do you think? Did Merrythought, in her old age, mess up

something with the course, or, is there actually someone out there now that wishes harm to our dear little Harry?

Who was Tom writing a letter to?

The answers to these questions and more, NEXT TIME!!!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

All I can say is that I worked on this today and even though it's late, I wanted to post this in hopes of encouraging everyone to take a breather from political stress.

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry opened his eyes to the far too familiar ceiling of the Hospital Wing, and a deep, bone shaking chill like nothing he had ever felt before. Suddenly he was shaking and try as he may to relax his muscles and stop, he couldn't. Despite the warmth that surrounded him, blankets probably magicked to emit heat, he had never been colder in his life.

"Harry?"

He tilted his head enough to see Tom, who was seated in a high backed chair at his side. He had a pillow at his back and a blanket over his knees, a book that looked suspiciously like a textbook open on his lap. And even though he looked as clean and put together as always, there was a pinched quality to his eyes and an unusual paleness to his complexion that the the golden light streaming in through the windows couldn't lift.

Harry managed a shaky smile through the shivering, "hey." He cleared his throat, it was horribly dry, "wh-what happened, what time is it?"

Tom moved the book from his lap and took up a glass of water on a nearby table, with a gentleness that would have surprised Harry at one time, he helped Harry sit up enough to take a few sips. When he laid back down something in the stiffness in Tom's shoulders relaxed. Even though the worry was still clear in his eyes.

"It's morning, Harry. Wednesday. What's the last thing you remember?" When he had sat down the glass Tom returned his hands to Harry. Smoothing back his hair, tucking the covers more securely around him, brushing the side of his neck as though checking for something. He didn't seem to be able to keep himself still.

Harry began to worry himself, if whatever happened had Tom this

frantic...What did he remember?"

"We were at the Quidditch pitch...I remember going into the maze," it was dark and cold and wet...the tasks had been, strange, "I remember the Devil's Snare, and the pack of mannequins, the bogart..." The event's were a swirl of shadows and bright spell light, there had been something off about the whole thing.

"You remember the mannequins?" Tom asked excitedly, leaning forward, something bright and fevered in his eyes.

"Yeah...they were odd. They fought as one, I managed to tie them up."

Tom's eyes narrowed at that, "you did? When was that?"

"I think they were the second thing I encountered, after the Devil's Snare, then...the bogart, the peskies...there was acid ooze, but it was different than what Merrythought taught us," Harry wracked his memory for anything after that, he remembered being exhausted after trying to neutralize the ooze, then...

"There was no acid," Tom said, his voice was suddenly cold.

Harry leaned back a little, something twisting unpleasantly in his chest, "there was, it was pretty far in, but I think I was on the right track. Only...the neutralizing spell wasn't working right. I had cast it so many times that I was starting to get tired after, then...then," what had happened after that?

"Harry," he looked back the strangeness of Tom's voice, he appeared calm, but it was as though his whole countenance had been cast in shadow, "you're telling me there was a...lake of acid?" Harry nodded, "and you don't remember anything after that?" When Harry shook his head Tom sighed, he stretched a hand out to cup the side of Harry's face, it was nearly burning against Harry's cold skin.

"When I found you the mannequins were attacking you, not as one, but as a unified team working together. They hit you with a curse of some sort. You don't remember any of that?"

He tried, but nothing formed out of the chaos of blue light and murky shadow, he shook his head again, "nothing."

Tom sunk into his own thoughts, eyes dark and unfocused as he drew his own conclusions of the night. His hand was a warm and stabling presence, Harry leaned into it, and once the question had burned it's

way to the surface, and he could think of nothing else, he asked, "Tom, what happened? That wasn't...that wasn't how the test was supposed to go, was it?"

Tom looked down at him and sighed deeply, "Merrythought thinks something malfunctioned. She's convinced that an animal crawled out of the forest when she wasn't watching and contaminated the spells she used to make the course."

"Is that even possible?"

Tom shrugged, "she's consulting the Gamekeeper now, but so far nothing is conclusive."

Harry smirked through the tremors, "and you told me there was nothing to fear about the exam." He said it playfully, but instantly regretted it when Tom perfectly put together facade crumbled.

He pulled away from Harry, and he would have said that Tom was sulking, but it seemed like such a ridiculous thing to say about him.

"Tom," Harry said, trying to disentangle himself from the many blankets he was under. They weighed a ton. "Tom, I didn't mean-"

"No," Tom said abruptly, "you're right. I told you it was safe, I told you there was nothing to worry about."

"It isn't your fault," Harry managed to free a hand, he wrapped it around one of Tom's and tugged. Nothing would have happened except that Tom allowed it. Allowed himself to be pulled down, face close to Harry. He whispered sternly, or as sternly as one could whisper. "Tom Riddle, this isn't your fault."

The shadow slowly melted from Tom's eyes, they were still tired, his brows still pinched in worry, but he no longer looked as though he were ready to kill the world.

He leaned further in and carefully, oh so gentle, brushed his lips against Harry's. "I was so worried," his voice was just as soft as Harry's. And just as full of intent.

"I know, but I'm safe now, right? Because of you." Harry squeezed his hand as hard as he could. Or he tried to. It felt as though his muscles were not his own...so much for any hope of getting out of bed that day.

"I'll make sure nothing like this ever happens again, I promise." Tom said it like he meant it. As though it were a pledge he was making. And Harry didn't doubt for a moment that he planned on keeping.

"I feel safer already," he couldn't hide his smile, that Tom, straight back, practical, no non-sense Tom, was making grand gestures in Harry's name.

He breathed deeply, taking in Tom's warmth, they were so close that if Harry moved forward even a little they would be touching noses. He smiled softly, "you know...we've never talked about it."

"It?" Tom asked, his eyes were half lidded and suddenly Harry wondered if he had slept at all the night before. It would be like him to stay awake, vigilantly watching over Harry. Slowly driving himself insane over something that was not his fault.

"Us. We've never talked about...what we are." To each other. What they were doing. Where it was going. Harry didn't want to push, or sound needy, or anything. But a part of him was desperate to know.

Tom was silent for a moment, then he brought a hand up to trace across Harry's face, over his cheek, down to jaw, "no, I suppose we haven't." He smiled, pressing a little closer and dropped his voice, "I'm...very fond of you, Harry Evans."

Harry laughed, he felt much warmer all the sudden, either due to Tom's closeness or his words, he could not tell. "I like you a lot too," he said, his own smile broad on his face.

He couldn't have said who leaned in first, only that one moment they were simply looking at one another, and then next, they were kissing. There was no in between that Harry could remember.

It was better, so much better than kissing Tom in his dreams, or the small stolen moments they had shared before. Something had changed, a switch flipped, and suddenly, everything fell into clear, vibrant detail.

It was not the first time their lips had touched. But it felt new. Different. Like that time meant more than the others.

When Tom pulled back Harry was slightly out of breath and much warmer than he had been.

"And as far as 'what we are doing', I believe the word they use is,

courting."

"Courting?" Harry asked numbly. What had they been talking about? Everything was warm and fuzzy in the best of ways. He settled further into the soft bed that now smelled vaguely of Tom, his eyes drifting closed.

From beside him Tom hummed softly, he pulled the covers back up around Harry's shoulders, brushing his hair back off his face as he closed his eyes and began to drift.

"You are the first good thing that has come into my life, you know? Other than learning about magic," Tom said so quietly even Harry had trouble hearing it.

He leaned further in, lips brushing against Harry's as he said, "will you let me court you? So I can prove it."

Harry smiled, not quite asleep but feeling dreamy and content, "m'kay," the words felt muzzy though he was sure he'd spoken them, "m'gonna court you too." Once he found out what that meant exactly. It sounded a lot more formal than simply going out with some one.

He'd ask Alphard about it later.

"Get some rest, I'll be back at lunch." If he said anything else, if he rose and left, Harry wasn't aware. He was already drifting softly away into a warm, peaceful sleep.

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Tom rose when he was certain that Harry had fallen asleep. He had lost energy so suddenly that if Tom didn't know he was peaceful and healing he would be beyond worried. He was still too cold to the touch, too pale and obviously exhausted. But that fire that Tom...that Tom loved...was still there and burning bright.

He opened his mouth, tried to say the words he only now, after such a disaster, allowing himself to realize. But nothing came.

He had never...loved...anyone before. How did he know it was anything like what he felt for Harry? They had a connection

somehow, but did that mean...

He shook his head, there was no reason worrying over this. Harry was special, he and Tom, they belonged together. Of that, he was positive.

The rest of it was simply semantics.

With a last kiss, pressed to Harry's brow, Tom left the Hospital wing, dispelling the privacy ward he had placed around Harry's bed with a casual flick of his wand.

He looked down at his, Yew, 34 centimeters. It was longer than Harry's and a completely different wood. Yet something about them was connected. Or was it simply his and Harry's connection? That thing that made him feel whole in Harry's presence.

He tucked his wand away, it wasn't worth worrying over until he got a response to his letter. He had used Comet, the Black's owl, as he was the fastest currently within the castle. If he was lucky the response would be swift. Then he could tell Harry.

There was no need adding yet another worry on his shoulders. Harry needed to focus on getting well.

Tom worked hard to remain calm for the day. Anytime when he wasn't near Harry to make sure he was alright, scratched painfully against his senses. It did not help that all the talk was about the 'accident' either.

It had gotten around the school that something had contaminated the course. The most popular theories were that either a Thestral or a Dementor had gotten in somehow and tainted the rest of the core magic.

No one seemed to realize how preposterous such a thing was. Thestrals were not dark creatures, and there wasn't a Dementor anywhere near the school.

Tom had his own theory as to what happened, and a budding idea of who was to blame.

He didn't let on that he was suspicious though, simply went about his day as usual.

Or, mostly as usual.

"Who is Morgana Drake?"

Tom had spirited himself back to the Hospital wing for lunch, and though the thin soup and sandwiches the elves had whipped up for Harry was most definitely not what was served in the Great Hall that day, Tom wouldn't have traded it for the world.

Harry had been sitting up when he came in, wrapped in a thick dressing gown and a myriad of blankets. He even fed himself. Though, the going was slow. So slow, in fact, that Tom wanted to snatch his spoon up and help.

He held back.

But it was a close thing.

"Morgana Drake is a girl in your year. Red hair, dark skin, green eyes. No?"

Harry shrugged, sipping softly at his soup. "I think...She's always the one who interrupts the teachers with questions."

"I wouldn't know about that," Tom chuckled lightly, "but she agreed to let you look at, and copy, her notes."

"I can just get Alphard's notes," Harry grumbled down at his bowl. It had been a moment too long that he lifted his spoon. Tom reached for it.

"Would you like help?"

"No, stop," Harry batted weakly at his hand, "I can feed myself."

Tom leaned back, hands up in surrender before going back to his own soup, which was perched precariously on his knee, "if you insist, dear, but I would be happy to assist," ignoring Harry's huff of annoyance he went on, "as for your notes, well, if you can read Alphard's handwriting then by all means, use his. But Morgana's are exemplary and she has already agreed."

He looked up after several silent seconds to find Harry staring at him, none of the heat he had expected, only a fond smile on his face.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome," Tom said, then, "now eat your soup before I really do start feeding you."

He left before the hour was over to go tend to the crowd, unsurprised to find Alphard waiting outside the door. As soon as Tom was in the hall he ran inside. Alphard's excited, "Harry!" reaching him just before the door swung closed.

It settled something in him to know that Alphard was so loyal to Harry, that even if Tom couldn't be there Alphard was watching. He might be the untried, but he was eager. And that was all that was needed at the moment.

Tom got through the rest of the day without a hitch. Everyone was too busy gossiping to make trouble. His snakes in particular were more sober than usual. He was a little disappointed that Harry was sleeping when Tom came to have dinner with him, Madam Caraway said she hadn't wanted to wake him if he was resting, and he could eat later when he woke.

It did however give Tom the time he needed to set things up. He stole away to the the room of requirements, made it ready, then took his spot in the Great Hall.

"Is Harry alright?" Alphard asked as soon as he was seated.

Tom had expected it, he answered as he filled a plate. "He's resting, the nurse is unsure when he'll wake. Perhaps you should go sit with him this evening, Alphard, I know he would enjoy your company."

"A-are you sure?" Alphard asked, casting a worried look to his cousin and then back at Tom, "will you be there too?"

"Later. I think it's past due for a...study session. Wouldn't you agree?" This time his look took in his knights, those that were close to him, he waited for them to nod in turn. "Good, the usual place, after dinner. Inform the others."

There were murmurs of, "yes," Orion rose to speak with a few people further down from them before moving to the Ravenclaw table. Before dinner was over the whole of his knights would know and meet him there. They knew better than to go against his direct order.

Only after the crowds had dispersed, the last of the lolly gagers squirreled back to their dens, did Tom make his way to the room.

There was no table for them to sit as there might have been. No cozy chairs and warm fires to put them at ease, as was his usual. Tom liked to go for opulence. Indulging in the aesthetics and comfort when he

could.

This time, however, he had largely taken for his own use, the construction and decor of the Chamber of Secrets. A place none of them would ever see, and a place of power. A place that was all his.

They stood in a circle, clustered together as they looked around at the pillars, carved snakes twining up and down their length. The floor of smooth jade bricks was more sound than the real one. No pools of stagnant water or white lichen growth. The rest of the room was in shadow, the single chandelier above them not quite strong enough to reach the edges.

As the door, large and carved from the inside, closed behind Tom, it vanished.

His slow steps echoed off of some faraway and unseen ceiling, and before he even reached the ring of light his knights had knelt where they stood.

"Curious things seem to be happening lately," Tom began, hands clasped behind his back, at ease, yet powerful. "Very curious. Imagine, an exam going so awry that one of the students ends up badly injured. Cursed, on school grounds. It's unheard of."

"Do you no believe what they are saying, my lord, about a dark beast tainting the course?" The speaker was a Hufflepuff girl, Ophelia Washborn, brighter than people though from her house placement and her large liquid brown eyes.

Tom did enjoy a good deception.

"No, Ms Washborn, I do not. You see, Orion and I handled a bit of the wards as we went in to retrieve Harry from the cursed exam. What we encountered could not have been made from a simple beast."

Tom payed close attention to them, stretched in front of him, which ones shifted as they knelt, who couldn't meet his eyes.

"Only someone familiar with the dark arts would have been able to taint the things within that course as they did. And as I'm certain it was not our dear professor, that only leaves," Tom paused, humming to himself as though in thought, "why, that only leaves one of my knights."

The knight in question twitched minutely. Tom's lip curled into a snarl

as he hissed. "Rise," as one they rose, gazes still lowered in respect. "Abraxas, step forward."

They parted as Malfoy stepped out of the shadows, he looked at Tom head on. At least he did not come sniveling before him.

"You haven't hidden your dislike for Harry. I'm sure most of us here have been party to your petty quips in his direction."

"He is a worm under your feet. Why you give him the time of day I-

Tom lifted a hand to stall him, "I did not ask you, Malfoy, why you do not like Harry. I already know why," Tom took a slow step around him, making a leisurely circle, "he shows up, unannounced and unknown. Bright enough that the ministry places him above his year in what is, perhaps, the most desired of courses. In many aspects, the course which is closest to our cause. He is, in so many ways, the things you wish you were," Tom stopped just behind him, the other knights closing the ring around them so that only Tom and Abraxas remained in the centre.

He spoke loud enough for all to hear, "Harry is a parstlemouth, he is sharp and well liked without having to posture and buy the affections of others." Tom's smile was razor sharp as he walked back to face Abraxas full on. "But most importantly he has my affection. My devotion. And instead of accepting this, you chose to destroy it. To destroy him."

Abraxas had turned a terrible shade of green during Tom's talk, but he still met his eyes, shoulders straight. "I did what I had to keep you from falling further under this...this spell he has on you."

"Spell?" Tom's lips twitched up a little. How silly a notion. There was no spell that could create what he and Harry shared.

He had already looked into that.

"He is deceiving you into thinking that he is something that he is not-" Tom forestalled him once more.

"If this were merely a discussion about Harry and why you do or do not like him, might I indulge you. Listen to see if perhaps, doubtful that it may be, you knew something about dear Harry that I do not. But I did not call this gathering over petty gossip." What little color was left in Abraxas' face fled, for the first time his slate blue eyes couldn't meet Tom's



"You put us all at risk with that stunt of yours," his hissed out, allowing his anger to seep into the room, dimming the light, chilling the air, "dark magic, right under a professor's nose."

"She would have never found out, I was careful."

"Foolish! You were foolish, and overly confident. If she had called in other professors to help they would have seen what Orion and I saw. And what if Harry had died," the words were a growl, painful to get out, "what then?" His and Orion's use of dark spells had been in desperation, and it was only luck that they hadn't been seen or detected.

"N-none of the mannequins were using unforgivable curses. They would have thought he had perished from their malfunction. Or that he could not best a cursed trial" Abraxas said, hesitantly, hands clasped before him to keep them steady.

"Pathetic." Tom let the single word echo though the room. "You are lucky that I have respect for the wards that surround this school," save for the Chamber itself, "it spares you the punishment you deserve. So for now, I leave you with this."

Raising his voice Tom announced to them all, "from this moment forth, Abraxas Malfoy is an enemy of house Slytherin." A few of the knights gasped, though most were composed enough to not even flinch. Abraxas lost control of his limbs, it would seem, and fell to the floor.

"From this moment on, you are no longer welcome in my presence. You will make yourself scarce, you will not speak to me or to Harry. If you so much as look his way outside of class you will know my wrath."

He let the words sink in, when Tom was satisfied by the looks of disdain the others were casting Malfoy's way he continued. "You will tell your accomplices, the Roberts cousins, that they share in your exile. And Malfoy?"

Abraxas rose his eyes to Tom, they were red, yet dry. Tom was unsure how he would have abided such a thing as crying and was happy to not have to deal with such a thing. "Should our paths cross outside of these walls which protect you, my hand will not be stilled from giving the punishment your actions warrant. Know this for the mercy that it is."

"Y-yes, my, my lord." Abraxas's voice broke as he spoke, but still he did not disgrace himself further.

"You are dismissed." The door behind Tom reappeared, and Abraxas rose on shaking legs, fleeing from the piercing judgement of his once peers.

Tom held them for a time longer. Instructed them to run damage control for Abraxas' little stunt. He knew his snakes well, those within and outside of his house. Lenient though Tom had been, they would not take lightly to someone breaking the rules. And in such a way that could later point a finger at them.

They were lucky, Tom made sure to drill into them, that someone like Dumbledore had not been close. Had not seen. One whiff of something dark near Tom and they would all be under his watchful eye.

He stayed until the last knight left, making sure to change the room into something new before letting it disappear altogether. The halls were silent as he walked through them. The sun already set, the torches throwing wildly dancing shadows in the chill breeze.

A piercing shriek had him stopping in his tracks, a shadow flitted to a nearby window, grisly and dark before stretching toward Tom. Comet, his tawny feathers glittering golden in the torchlight.

"Hello there," Tom said, pleased as he crossed to it. There was a thick envelope of maroon parchment clasped in its beak. He handed this over to Tom with a low chirp. "I'm afraid I don't have a treat for you at this moment, I promise to bring you double next time. Is that sufficient?"

Comet gave another chirp before nipping at Tom's robes and taking flight once more. He had to assume that it was a yes, who knew what owls truly thought of such things.

"Tom!"

With a grimace Tom turned, tucking the envelope into his robes. "Good evening, professor." he said with all the cheeriness he could muster.

Dumbledore, lurking the halls, no doubt looking for more dark magics this night, had spotted Tom. And, like a moth drawn to an accusing flame, he had needed to stop and chat.

Tom gave him a little smile, already turning, "I'm afraid I was headed to the Hospital Wing, professor, if you'll excuse me."

"Oh, yes. How is poor, Harry doing? I was meaning to check in on him myself." Dumbledore said thoughtfully.

Tom had to work hard to not growl in distaste. Dumbledore showing up in the Hospital Wing, or worse, following Tom down, was the last thing he wanted right then.

"He's well, just a little tired. He slept most of the day. Madam Caraway seems to think he'll be ready to leave in the morning."

"Oh, that's good to hear! Good to hear," Dumbledore smiled brightly, "was that the Black's owl I saw just then?"

Tom seethed softly, wanting nothing more than to run off himself, "Orion lets me use his owl when I'm in need."

"Such a good friend," he said 'friend' as though it were something vile. But he was cheery the next second. "And how is Garrick doing these days?" At Tom's raised brow he continued, "Ollivander. That is who your letter is from, is it not? I recognize his stationary."

Tom grit his teeth, hoping it came off as a smile of sorts. "I just had a question for him, as it happens. I've yet to read the response. If you'll excuse me, professor, I have work to do."

"Of course, Tom, I don't wish to keep you." His eyes followed Tom as he rounded the corner, before Tom was completely out of sight he yelled, "do give Harry my regards."

Tom would do no such thing! Dumbledore was a lousy snoop. He had been itching to pinch someone for dark magic since Tom opened the Chamber. He knew that Dumbledore would like nothing more than to prove Tom was behind it. To see him expelled and cast out. The very notion that he might Tom responsible for Harry's condition made his blood boil.

He took a deep breath, and found his centre. He would not bring his anger before Harry. He would not indulge Dumbeldore and become riled up.

His anger had simmered down considerably by the time he arrived at Harry's bedside. He was still asleep, though his color was better and he was under fewer blankets than before.

Tom sat in the chair at his side with a sigh, tension leeching from him at finally being back where he belonged.

In a way it was better that Harry slept, it allowed Tom a chance to read the letter, he took it from his robes and opened it hastily.

Dear Tom,

I do indeed remember you. I never forget a wand, nor the people who attract them.

It is interesting that you should ask such a question. The phenomenon which you described is a very particular thing.

The Priori Incantatem.

Such a thing is only possible when two wands are linked via their core material. If two wands hold cores from the same parent donor, then that, in short, links them. Sibling wands, we call them.

I say it is interesting you should ask, as the phoenix that gave a feather for your wand dropped one other when I came to collect it. I have forged it into a wand that, by all accounts, is your wand's sibling. Holly, 11 inches, springy. I hold it here on a shelf in the back, waiting for the one who is to be its master.

Someone who, I dare say, will most likely share a great deal in common with yourself. Such is how these things tend to grow.

I cannot tell you when the wand will be bought, of course, but I assure you it will be safe and sound until then.

It is good to see one so young interested in the art of wand making, do feel free to ask me any other questions you might have.

Yours,  
Garrick Ollivander

Tom's hands shook. He read the letter once more, then again.

Priori Incantatem. Something only sibling wands could create...

Ollivander had the material to make a wand with a sibling core to Tom's. A wand that had not been sold. A single wand that shared a link to his own.

He looked to Harry, Sleeping soundly, small and finally peaceful. And all he could think was that Abraxas had been right.

Not about Harry's deceit. Not about being wary of him, to fear what he might be.

He had only been right in pointing out how little of Harry they really knew.

War orphan.

A talented fighter for his age.

He was quiet, kept mostly to himself before Alphard and Tom had him opening up.

He was a parstlemouth. A very rare gift indeed.

Then there were the things that perhaps only Tom knew. That Harry harbored a deep and powerful sadness in regards to his past. That, despite all that, he had such joy and warmth within him.

So many of his oddities could be brushed off as trauma from the war. Of living on the run. Of seeing so many that he loved die.

Harry had plenty of scars, Tom had seen several for himself. Did he get them in running from a war with his godfather. Or...

Tom couldn't even fathom what else it could be. But it hung there, large and looming on his mind.

Tom reached forward, brushing a hand against Harry's cheek as he slept. He leaned into Tom's touch, making a soft, sleepy noise, but not waking. Carefully, Tom snaked his hand under the pillow until he fingers found their mark.

He slipped the wand out from under the pillow, inspecting it in the dim light of a single candle. He was no expert in woods, though it was darker than his own, springy. It could certainly be holly. Tom took out his own to compare. The size was right. And Harry's wand was warm in his hand, nearly vibrating with power. Just like his own.

Harry had a wand that marched his own internally.

Harry had a wand that hadn't been sold yet.

For all that Tom was a wizard, he had always been practical. He had

learned of things in life that would have made him scoff when he was younger. That unicorns were real. That he could fly, if he so chose. He had always known on some level that magic was real. But it wasn't until he had proof that he really, fully, believed.

And so it was. He had known, deep down, that there was something about Harry that simply did not mesh with rest of reality.

It wasn't until he was holding the proof in his hands that he could force himself to believe.

One question answered, so many more left to go.

He slipped Harry's wand back under the pillow, leaning forward Tom kissed him softly, "oh Harry," Tom whispered, low enough to not wake him, "however did you get stuck here with me?"

And when, not where, did he come from?

## Chapter End Notes

Hello again!

I don't have much to add here. This chapter pushes forward a few key plot points, I was really happy to get to it!

For anyone upset that Abraxas got off easy, well, this ride ain't over yet!

Kudos to those who guessed the letter was to Ollivander!

I hope no one got frightened by thinking Tom would pull away after the letter! I just got these two openly acknowledging that they are in a relationship, nothings getting in the way of that.

Thanks for reading, dears, and all your wonderful comments!!

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"It's simple, really," Alphard said around an entire chocolate frog, already reaching for another, "say you fancy someone, right? If you want them to know it you would give them something, like candy or flowers, or do something special for them like make them food or offer to help them with a task. If they reciprocate then they would do the same for you. You gave them candy, they, in return, give you a roast chicken."

"A whole chicken?" Harry asked, brows raised more in amusement than exasperation.

"Don't be snarky I'm trying to tell you-"

"I think you're just hungry." Harry couldn't help but smile into his hot cocoa. He was buried in what felt like a ton of blankets, it was only two, though they thick and massively wooly, and he had been holding onto the mug mostly for warmth than the want of anything sweet, renewing the heat with a quick charm whenever it cooled.

He and Alphard had holed up in a small nook Harry had found a while ago, a quilted window seat and cushions done up in the colors of all four houses looked out over the rippling slate gray lake, giving them the allusion of basking in the joys of the outdoors, even as a storm thundered away on the other side of the window pane.

Harry hadn't been allowed to leave the Hospital Wing until Friday afternoon, feeling much rested and still far too cold for anyone's liking, and in that time Tom had been by his side almost constantly.

Until the next afternoon. Claiming he had a meeting to for a class project, he left Harry in Alphard's care and swept off somewhere in a flurry of black wool and righteousness. And finally Harry was able to ask his burning question.

What the hell was courting?

"So," he said, drawing Alphard back from his pouting silence, "you just give each other gifts?"

"Or do things for each other, yeah," Alphard shrugged, "and well, you know, spend time with each other. Snog. Cuddle. You know." He said again. And that part was very much like dating someone, so Harry nodded.

"Then, eventually, you start planning a marriage contract and-"

"Marriage!" Harry nearly dropped his hot chocolate. "Marriage?" He repeated incredulously.

"Well...yeah. That's the point of courting. That eventually you'll get married...if it works out and you decide you like the other person enough."

Harry sputtered, "I'm sixteen!"

"Well I didn't say right away, did I? I said 'eventually'." Alphard said petulantly.

"Tom's only seventeen, he can't be thinking about marriage."

Alphard shrugged again, swallowing another mouthful of chocolate, "he's seventeen, that isn't too early. Neither is sixteen, really. A lot of people have arranged marriages and end up needing to start the courtship early to try and...er...build a connection with each other."

Harry looked out to the lake, worrying his bottom lip as he thought. He and Tom already had a connection. It was, and yet wasn't, like the connection he'd had with Voldemort. What was between him and Tom was...good. It made him feel warm and safe and...loved. Not because he was Harry Potter. Not because he was famous, or a hero, or because he represented a shared loss. Tom wanted Harry because he was Harry.

"I still can't believe he told you he was going to court you!" Alphard exclaimed, jolting Harry once more, "you don't usually tell someone, you just start doing it."

"I don't know if he knew I was awake still..." Harry said softly, it was a wonder he could still remember it himself, everything from when he first woke felt fuzzy and distant.

"Has he started yet?" Alphard asked, sifting through his box of candy. It was his hoard, he had called it. His secret stash that Orion didn't know about or he would certainly take it away. Alphard guarded as greedily as any dragon.



Or, any dragon with more sugar than blood in their veins.

"Well?" Harry thought for a moment, sipping his cocoa as Alphard choose a taffy wand this time.

When Harry had been cleared to leave the Hospital Wing Tom had been there with a new set of robes for him and steady arm to help him around the halls. It had been nice, and exactly what he'd come to expect from Tom if he was being honest. There had been something else though. When Harry had been slipping on his shoes Madam Caraway had returned to him his robes from the night of the accident.

Pock marked with acid at the hem, torn at the cuffs from falling on the unforgiving ground or snagged on thorns, and a large hole where the curse had hit his arm.

Harry had instantly been crestfallen. His new robes. The first good clothing he'd ever really owned outside of dress robes. And they were ruined.

He said as much to Tom, unthinking, and then.

"I suppose I'll have to send a letter to Jean-loup this time and ask for another."

He had barely gotten the words out when the damaged robed had been snatched from his hand only to disappear into Tom's own robes an instant later. He had smiled at Harry, a little sharply, and insisted that he would take care of it. And that was that.

Harry tapped the side of his cup thoughtfully, "maybe."

"Maybe? What does 'maybe' mean?" Alphard choked out, "either he's started or he hasn't."

It was Harry's turn to shrug, and subtly move the sweets box away from Alphard. he was beginning to understand why Orion wanted to keep an eye on his cousin's candy intake.

He sat his cup down, taking up a pillow to hold and lean his head on as Alphard told him about courtings he had seen before and then somehow manged to talk his way into a story about an ancient aunt's disastrous one hundred and eighty fifth birthday party, that somehow involved a giant squid and a mint pudding gone wrong. He let the words wash over him, not quite falling asleep, but only just.

He didn't even startle when added warmth surrounded him, a comforting pressure that wrapped around his whole chest and held him close.

"There you are," Tom's lips brushed against temple.

Harry smile, leaning back into the warmth, "wasn't hiding," he said sleepily. He cracked his eyes open in time to see Alphard's back disappear around the corner, "Alphard?"

"I asked him to leave," Tom said softly, he leaned back against a few pillows, causing Harry to lay on him a little more, "I want to keep you company for a while, my dear."

"What about your rule?" Harry asked around a big yawn, "no walking alone,"

Tom shrugged, "Orion and the others are still in the library, it's only one floor down. And besides, Alphard's fast."

"I'm fast too," Harry argued weakly. He shimmied around until he could lay his cheek on Tom's chest, ear right over his heart.

"I know you are, it's just-"

"Was youngest seeker in a hundreds years," he murmured, the steady thump, thump, thump, of Tom's heart lulling him into another nap, "cuz I'm so fast, 'm good."

"Seeker?" Tom asked softly, "the seeker for whom?"

But Harry had already drifted off to sleep.

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Tom's question, it seemed, was doomed to not be answered. But even that little snatch of thought had given him some valuable insight. 'Youngest seeker in a hundred years', but where and when?

Perhaps it was Hogwarts? Harry had seemed to have an uncanny ability to navigate the castle. That morning that Tom had followed him, he had assumed that Harry was simply meandering around. Getting lost without a care. What if he had known exactly where to

go?

He had seemed appropriately impressed with Hogmead, though. If he had been to the school in a future time then certainly he had seen the town as well.

....Unless, for some reason, Hogmead did not stand in the future? Or had been much changed from now.

He allowed himself to ponder the possibilities as Harry napped on him, until the sun dipped low enough that they were lit only by the flickering wall sconces. Rousing Harry enough so that he could walk on his own was a feat. He had been very tired after the curse, though the nurse, and Tom's own magical examining, only hinted that it was a normal part of his recovery.

Still, Tom didn't relish having to explain to prying eyes why he would be carrying an unconscious student through the halls. So walk, Harry must.

"Are you hungry?" Tom asked when Harry was steady enough to stand on his own.

Rubbing his eyes, Harry yawned, tilted his head in thought for a moment, and then nodded. "I want something besides soup." He said with a pout.

Tom hummed, "we'll have to see what is there," he said airily, draping an arm, and most of his own cloak, over Harry's shoulders. The truth was that he was thrilled Harry was gaining an appetite once more. He hadn't been able to eat more than little soup at each meal that Tom had been present for. Wanting to have something more substantial was as clear a sign of his renewing health as any. Tom would gladly watch Harry eat a whole pie if he wanted....and if he didn't fear it would make him sick.

Their trek was a slow one, the meal already well underway when they reached the Great Hall. Something inside Tom itched at that fact. He had never gone to a meal late since first receiving his Prefect badge. Though, seeing Orion and Rossier looking over the hall in his stead was something of a balm...if a weak one.

There was indeed a soup at the side of the table where they usually sat. Thick and orange, probably pumpkin, sprinkled over with almonds and something green chopped up on top as garnish. He resisted the urge to unnecessarily point it out as an option, and

instead watched as Harry took a roll, some peas, and a small slice of beef.

Harry picked at his food, mostly keeping his eyes down, undoubtedly feeling the stares of others on him. After the...incident, he had been the talk of the school and everyone was keen on seeing him and verifying if any of the rumors were true. That the curse had changed him physically. That he was little more than ghost now. That dark magic had twisted his mind.

He had to know that they were staring at him. Whispering about him behind their hands. Yet it passed over Harry as though he didn't even register the difference. Much like he had ignored the stares and talks after his sorting.

"Where's Malfoy?"

Tom snapped out his musings at Harry's soft voice, those nearest to them fell silent, Alphard shifted nervously before Orion smacked him out of Harry's sight. Tom put on a bright smile.

"Malfoy?" He said thoughtfully, "is he not here?"

"No," Harry said, glancing to where he had been sitting on Rossier's left, "he wasn't there yesterday either."

Tom shrugged, "was he not?"

Harry didn't answer, and talk around them picked back up. The truth? Abraxas and his the Roberts cousins had been eating at the Hufflepuff table. With the Ravensclaws between them they could keep to their exile while still attending meals. Eventually Harry would find this out, either from observation or over hearing gossip, but for now it was one less thing for him to worry over.

And the last thing Tom wanted was for Harry to spend anytime fretting over Malfoy.

Harry didn't eat much of his food, and by the fourth time he had cast his gaze to the orange soup Tom reached over and poured a bowl. He took a very small sip, as though he had done it for himself, then sat the spoon and bowl down between them, just a little closer to Harry than himself.

It didn't take long before Harry took up the discarded spoon and ate some of it himself. Tom was very please when, at the end of the meal,

Harry had eat most of the soup, two rolls, a few spoonfuls of peas and a couple of bites of treacle tart. When it had been nearly five minutes since he'd manged a bite and he unsuccessfully tried to hide his third yawn, Tom managed to herd Harry from the table and back out into the hall.

Taking advantage of the fact that most of the students were still at dinner, and the common room was relatively sparse, Tom led them down the hall and into his own room. Harry looked up at him with a raised brow, the effect undoubtedly more cute than he had meant it to be, with his mussed up hair and the fact that he had swaddled himself in Tom's cloak once he had taken it off at the door.

Tom pushed him towards the bed, "get some rest, I have some work to do."

"I could just go back to my own room." Harry said, though he hugged the cloak closer to himself and didn't make a move towards the door.

"You could," Tom said, placing a kiss on his forehead, right on the odd little scar there, Harry jumped at the gesture on contact, then quickly leaned into it before Tom pulled back. "Or, you can take a nap on my bed while I finish up a few things in here."

"I have homework too...I think." Harry said as he climbed onto Tom's bed and curled up against his pillows, "I should-" He cut off with another large yawn.

"You should rest, you have plenty of time to get your assignments in, I've already spoken with your professors."

"Tom..."

"They understand that you will need more time," Tom sat his desk, sure that Harry would be sleeping soundly soon. He could almost feel Harry's exhaustion as his own, there was no way he would be able to stay awake now that he'd eaten something.

About thirty minutes after, when Harry's breaths had evened out and through their connection he could only sense peace, Tom put up the book he had been studying and took out Harry's torn and beaten robe to continue his repairs.

Tom was no clothier. He most likely would never turn a head with any grant designs. But he knew his stuff when it came to repairs. With another quick look to Harry, Tom took out his little stash of silver

needles, fine threads, and his few scraps of material he had salvaged from robes here and there.

Harry's robes were of a fine silk, something he didn't have much of, but there were too many places that had been eaten away by the acid for him to skimp on the repairs.

With a steady hand he began to patch. The stitches as fine as he could get them. When the colors between the original robe and the patches did not match up, a little magic brought their colors closer to together.

The hems and cuffs had become ragged in some parts and thus more resistant to the clean stitch work than the rest. There Tom had little choice but to hide the unevenness with little black embroidered stars that he outlined in the same silver that went on the hems.

When he was finished it was not, strictly speaking a regulation school robe anymore. Not with the little stars, but Tom was vastly pleased with it. And he doubted very much anyone would say anything to Harry about it. From what he could glean all the professors rather had a liking for him.

Tom folded the robe and went over to wake Harry. It had been about two hours, he should probably try to stay awake until it was time to retire for the night.

But when he reached the bed and saw Harry there, curled around his pillow, a soft smile on his sleeping face, Tom couldn't resist crawling over the now rumpled covers and wrapping himself around Harry. It was such a strange urge, so impulsive, and it hadn't occurred to him until it was already done that it was not something Tom would normally do.

A month ago Tom would have eased himself away, retracted this invitation of closeness. Put up another wall to separate himself from others. He was the Heir of Slytherin. He was beyond such needs. Others were to bow to him, give in to him. Not the other way around.

A month ago such a slip would have been a disgrace. Today, it filled him with warmth, a sense of peace.

Tom curled closer, running his hands over Harry's silk covered frame. He could almost feel every bone, harshly jutting in some places, and terrible dips in others. On one pass of his ribs Tom slowed, adding just a little too much pressure as he tried to count each one, causing Harry to jerk in his grip.

"Tom," his scolding tone was less impressive followed by a yawn, "tickles."

"Apologies, my dear. I did not mean to wake you."

"Mhmm," Harry hummed, wiggling closer to Tom, he could feel the cold of Harry's fingers through his robes.

"Would you like more tea, maybe a slice of cake, I can run to the kitchens."

"Cake?"

"Or some soup."

"We just ate," Harry pulled back to look up at him, his eyes were still a little hazy though he was waking up now.

"That was hours ago, dear."

Harry settled back against his chest, "I'm not hungry," his voice muffled as he nuzzled closer.

"Are you still cold?" He pulled the blanket around them before Harry could answer, scooping Harry up as much as he could, his hands never stopping as they smoothed over Harry's back and arms to warm him up.

"Tom," and Tom couldn't help but smile at Harry's little whine. He tried very hard to keep laughter from his voice.

"Yes, dear?"

Harry tilted his head to peak out at him from amongst the blanket cocoon and Tom's arms, "I'm pretty sure wandering hands is not part of courting."

Tom laughed heartily, pulling Harry closer to his chest and holding him tight. Warmth suffused him, and the scent of summer and flowers that always seemed to follow Harry around filled his senses. Could there be anything more perfect than this?

"I promise my intentions were pure. I only want to keep you warm." Tom brought a hand up to cup Harry's cheeks, leaning forward he placed a lingering, yet entirely chaste, kiss on his lips, "and there are no rules for where hands can and can't go during courting."

"Is there not?" Harry asked mischievously, his cheeks a pretty pink, "I'll have to ask Alphard if that's true."

Tom gasped, "do you not trust me?"

"Hmmm...trust?" Harry asked, full of skepticism as he tapped a finger against his lips.

Tom rolled onto his back, arm draping dramatically over his eyes, "I am wounded! To be called a scamp by the one I hold dear. I shan't recover."

Giggling, Harry wiggled closer until he was laying over Tom's chest, "poor Tom and his wandering hands."

Tom brought his hands to Harry's face once more, brushing over his cheeks, down his jaw, smoothing back the black silk of his hair. Even though there was still a smile on Harry's face and a playful gleam in his eyes, Tom spoke with complete sincerity. "I would never think to touch you without your premission first, I would never make any move that I did not know you wanted. I want you to know that."

Tom's dreams were sacrosanct. They belonged to Harry, and their time together was the most important part of his life. But they did not leave him much time to simply dream. It had been too long since he'd slept as others do that he had never thought to wonder what his dreams might manifest now. If he had to hazard a guess though he would say they would be full of Harry.

And maybe that was why wanting touch him, wanting to hold him, to kiss him, to be here, like this, came as such a surprise. Without being able to process these things in a dream, or to focus on them in his thoughts, had made them all the more strong when he was in Harry's presence.

A part of him might want more, but he would never ever press if Harry wasn't ready. If he decided he didn't want Tom after all.

There was pain at the end of that thought. He knew it would hurt. Knew a part of him would rage if such a rejection ever came to be.

He pushed it away to focus on bright jade eyes, and a surprised, yet angelic face.

Harry seemed rather taken aback by Tom's statement. He opened his mouth a few times, but nothing came out. Finally, he leaned forward

and this time was the one to initiate the kiss.

He curled his fingers into Tom's hair, using this grip and his elbows to pull himself up further onto Tom's chest and deepened the kiss. He was so light the pressure was more pleasure than pain and pulled a deep groan from Tom's chest.

With Harry firmly draped over him, Tom pulled the covers back up around them and fought the urge to roll over and encapsulate Harry under him. He was still so frail from the curse, no matter his protests otherwise, and Tom didn't want to take the chance of hurting him. So he wrapped his arms around Harry's back and lost himself in the slight weight on his chest, the delicate bones under his hands, and the scratch of slender fingers on his scalp, as soft petal lips met his own.

As all good things do, the kiss came to an end. Both of them a little out of breath, Harry resting his head on Tom's chest, his fingers curled in Tom's hair, and a lovely flush to his cheeks.

Tom couldn't take his eyes off of him. He watched every flutter of his dark lashes, every twitch of a finger or hitched breath of a yawn. There wasn't a second of that moment, that was just them, with Harry alive and warm in his arms, that Tom dared to miss.

Eventually Harry pulled away, rubbing his tired eyes he made to get up from his perch on Tom. "I should get to bed."

"Silly, Harry. You are already in bed." Tom said helpfully.

Harry gave him an unamused look, "I'm pretty sure sharing a bed is scandalous for courting couples."

Technically, yes. Well, for couples as early in their courting as they were, at least. "We've done it before," Tom said with a smirk.

Harry's blush deepened, "that was different"

Tom wouldn't argue, as much as he wanted. Coercion was not something he was interested in. It was clear that Harry was taking Tom's proposal to court to heart. It was sweet and touching. And Tom wasn't going to do anything to make Harry go back on it.

"I have something for you before you go," Tom sat up, holding Harry close as he changed their position, helping him to sit on Tom's legs once they were upright. He reached over and took up the discarded robe, presenting it to Harry with all the flourish that one could muster

with an unwrapped garment. "For you."

Harry took it with a little smile, and a bashfully whispered, "thanks." He unfurled that robe, running a finger over the new stitches and little stars that Tom left behind.

During his inspection Harry's smile fell and something tightened through their connection, causing Tom's chest to seize painfully.

Swallowing through a lump in his throat Tom managed to say, "do you not like it?" Only for his pain to turn to horror as Harry lifted his gaze to meet his and a fine sheen of tears rimmed his lovely eyes.

Tom had made Harry cry! He hated the robe so much that he was crying! It was the worst possible outcome. So terrible he hadn't even thought it would happen. He was lost. He was a drift in a awful sea of despair and cold, cold, dread, and he did not know how he had gotten there or where to start to get back.

"Harry?" He started, unsure and desperate.

"Tom, I-" Harry sniffed, rubbing his eyes so hard he had to remove his little golden glasses, "this is...no one has ever." He seemed unable to finish a single thought and eventually ended up throwing himself onto Tom and hugging him close.

Then he felt it, with Harry's heart over his. He was not angry or upset, or horrified, or any number of terrible things. He was grateful. Overwhelmed by some emotion that Tom had no name for, only a sense of. As though he were only catching the edge of a thought. Some half remembered thing. The image of a boy in a lonely orphanage being handed a new pair of shoes to replace a worn pair that let the snow in and hurt his feet.

It was finding kindness when one expected to be looked over and forgotten. He had no words for it. But in that moment he understood it all too well.

"I can't believe I'm crying, I'm sorry," Harry said, pulling back, trying to wipe the tears from his face, "I guess I'm still not myself from the curse." He said it with a little laugh, as though he weren't fully certain that was the truth.

"You have nothing to be sorry about, Harry," Tom pulled him close, kissing the top of Harry's head, "you do not hate it then?"

Harry fixed him with slightly watery, and very vibrant eyes, "it might be the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me," he worried a little at his lip, biting them back to redness. Whatever he had been warring with himself with he finally said, "I didn't...have much, when I was younger. There wasn't...for the longest time, I didn't have anyone who...who cared enough..."

Tom had known for sometime that Harry's past was not a happy one. If you put the obvious tragedies aside there were still the scars and how he refused to speak of his past. Granted, if he were from the future he most likely couldn't talk about his past in much detail. But he never said anything at all. Not even generalities.

Tom smoothed a hand down Harry's back in comforting circles, "you don't need to talk about you past, Harry. I know...I know that there are things in your past you can't talk about. And it's alright," he said quickly when Harry looked as though he would speak, and then, "it's alright, because, even if our pasts were not ideal, even if they were full of pain and horrors. We have each other now, and I promise that I will do whatever I can to make sure your future is nothing but happiness."

For a long moment Harry was silent. He simply looked at Tom with his unreadable eyes. Harry remained silent as he folded the robe, slid off of Tom's lap and crawled off the bed. And he spoke not a word as he laid the robe on the chair nearby, and began to unbutton the one he wore.

Tom did not gape. He was much too in control of himself for that, no matter how unhinged Harry made him feel. But he had to clinch his jaw as Harry slipped the robe from his shoulders, folded it, and laid it, along with his glasses, on top of the one that Tom had fixed.

And he did not speak a word until he had climbed back into Tom's bed, wiggled under the covers and settled back against the pillows. Then it was only to give Tom a titled headed, inquisitive look and say, "aren't you going to get ready for bed?"

"Of course, my dear," with a parting kiss on Harry's brow, Tom left the bed and went to his wardrobe. Harry might have lovely silk underthings to sleep in, but Tom's were far more practical than that. So he exchanged his robe and starch rough undershirt for a cottony soft nightshirt before hurrying back to bed.

With a wave of his hand the candles went out, leaving them in the

rolling, silver green light from the lake above.

Tom took Harry in his arms once more, and delighted that Harry allowed himself to be moved. He situated them much like they had been before, with Harry laying on him instead of the bed, his head in the crook of Tom's neck, and his arms and legs wrapped around Tom's torso.

"Is this alright?" He asked softly.

"Yeah," Harry said, squeezing Tom closer before settling down. His breathing evened out and Tom thought he might have drifted off already, then, lips pressed to Tom's pulse point, he said, "Tom...I'm really happy that I ended up here with you."

Tom pressed him closer, placing another kiss on Harry's brow. 'Ended up' with Tom. As apposed to somewhere else. Some time else. The idea that his sweet, brave, Harry could have been sent to some other time, to some other place where he might not have found someone to hold and cherish him...It was perhaps the most awful thought he had ever had. He pushed it away. He would not think on it.

"Me too, Harry," Tom held Harry close, like the treasure he was, like a lifeline. It didn't take long for Harry to fall asleep. He felt it in their connection. Before Tom could follow suit, see if Harry was willing to meet in their dreams, he took a moment to breathe, and enjoy the now.

Happy? He wasn't simply happy that Harry was in his life. For the first time ever Tom was content. He was peaceful.

He was complete.

Chapter End Notes

Hello loves!!!

I hope you enjoyed what is pretty much just 5k word of cuddling.

We could all use a little softness now I think.

I'm going to try to keep the updates from falling too far apart. But i'm moving at the end of next month. If you're keeping count this is the fourth move since I started this story, but this one is bigger (to another state) and there's a lot I have to do to prepare. So can't promise when another update will come. But i'll try to not

go completely away in that time.

Hopefully the next chapter will have a little more plot. I was not expecting all this fluff, but i'm not complaining. They deserve all the snuggling they can get.

I hope y'all enjoyed it! You are all just amazing! I can't believe this story is at 4k kudos and 70k hits!! Thank you guys so much!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

It's 85 year!!! I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Waking up in Tom's arms, warm for the first time in days and secure in a way that he had never truly experienced before, was something beyond perfection.

During the run of his illness Harry's dreams had been blissfully empty. He would fall into a dark void of dreamless rest where nothing from his past could plague him. The down side had been that Tom was unable to reach him. He said that the connection seemed to blur around him, that Harry had simply fuzzed through his grasp when he tried to pull him in. As much as he missed spending his nights with Tom, Harry was quickly coming to love waking up to his presence. He had been there in the Hospital Wing nearly every time he opened his eyes. And yet it was nothing compared to this.

He hadn't moved much in the night, not that Harry had ever been much of a wild sleeper, one typically needed more room than he had been afforded in his youth to get in the habit of sprawling out. Though this time his stillness could have had something to do with the arms still wrapped around his waist, and the fact that he was koala hugging Tom within an inch of his life.

Perhaps the most outstanding thing about waking up in such a position was that Harry couldn't find it in himself to be even little embarrassed or uncomfortable about it. Instead he wanted nothing more than to stay there, with his head pillowed on Tom's chest, with strong arms around him, and the steady thump of Tom's heart lulling him back to sleep.

But the room was bright behind his eyelids, and even the perfect comfort he was in couldn't keep his stomach from growling, horrendously loud in the peaceful room.

Tom's chest shook as he laughed and Harry held tightly to not be knocked off. Even still he wavered on the brink of closing his eyes and going back to sleep.

"Come on, up we get. It's time for breakfast."

Harry was ready protest. He was warm and comfortable and he had a few vague ideas about picking up where they had left off the night before. He was feeling much better, something about sleeping wrapped around Tom seemed to have worked wonders on banishing the lingering exhaustion that had hung around him. And Tom was such a wonderful sight to wake to. He still looked near perfect even after a night of sleep. His hair softly curling around his face, the way the soft green light of the shifting lake played along the smooth planes of his face. Harry would have happily lay there for hours.

But his efforts to snuggle closer, to twist his fingers in Tom's tousled hair, to start peppering kisses along his jaw towards his lips, was cut off with a deep laugh and Tom moving them both bodily to sit up.

"None of that, or we'll miss breakfast altogether." Tom said sternly as he placed his feet on the floor and prompted Harry to stand.

Harry pouted and thanked his stars that he wasn't barefoot as the chill of the floorboards soaked into this stockinged feet. Then a thought struck him, and he smiled as Tom made to stand, "How is Tom, the perfect Head Boy, handling not being the first one into the Great Hall? I bet it's torture for you!" Harry chirped gleefully.

Tom scowled at him as he swept by on the way to his wardrobe, though Harry could feel amusement that wasn't his own.

"Rossier and Orion will take care of things in my absence," Tom said as he pulled out a fresh robe. Pitch black, perfectly pressed, the only difference between that robe and the ones he wore during school hours was the lack of the Slytherin emblem and silver threaded hems.

Harry padded around the bed to where his clothes sat in a nice little pile. The down side of having all his street robes....was that what people called them during this time....all in different styles and shades was that he could not simply put on the same robe the next day and go about his merry way. With a huffed sigh he started pulling on the robe, he would just change when he got to his room.

"And Rossier and Orion know to step in when you aren't there? They aren't Prefects or anything."

Tom stepped out from behind the wardrobe door, even his hair was smooth and glossy, he smirked at Harry, his dark eyes following as he finished the last of the robes buttons. "They know what is expected of them, even if I'm not there to guide them," Tom said in obvious pride.

Harry hummed softly, "that sounds like a nice setup. It's good that your friends are there to help you out when you can't be there." Harry smiled brightly, slipping on his glasses and getting into his slippers. He had, of course, seen Tom and his...followers. He wasn't sure friends was the right word. The way they trailed after him, deferred to him, looked up to him. It was clear that he was not a simple friend to them.

Tom's brow twitched, his jaw tightened, it was quick, but Harry had seen it, and had to wonder if perhaps he was having a similar thought as well. Harry strode up to Tom and wrapped his arms around his waist, face pressed into his chest. In an instant the statue that was Tom Riddle softened, relaxed arms rose to hold Harry close.

"I suppose you're right, my dear, I am rather lucky," Tom's voice was soft as he leaned forward to press his lips to the crown of Harry's head.

It was impossible to go on in the next few days as though nothing had changed. Between he and Tom becoming official, to the incident with the cursed test, Harry couldn't step out of bed in the morning without confronting eager stares and quiet murmurs.

Funny enough it seemed that Tom had a harder time dealing with this sort of thing than Harry. He often glowered back when a glance in Harry's direction lasted just a second longer than was polite, he was quick to come to Harry's defense when someone tried to suggest the curse had effected him adversely. After the first few days of such treatment, though, those sorts of occurrences petered off.

For the most part.

"I heard it from Julian, you know, the Hufflepuff that kinda looks like a squirrel." Alphard flipped another catalogue onto Harry's bed, he hadn't actually opened it, more interested in giving Harry his fresh gossip than potential holiday shopping.

"He doesn't look like a squirrel," Harry muttered, the catalogue he was currently look into was for high end office supplies and knickknacks. And though it was an impressive panoply, he didn't think Tom had much use for things like a shimmery prismatic paperweight, even if the little colored photo showed a stunning display.

He turned the page and gave a little more thought to Alphard's words. "Anyway, why would he care if Tom and I were...er...physical

anyway?"

Alphard's sigh could have put Draco at his most theatric to shame, "Harry! First off, I'm pretty sure one of his grandparents was an honest to Merlin squirrel, secondly...You should care! It's...well...it's obscene," he said the last part in a whisper, casting a look around the empty dorm room as though afraid one of Harry's roommates were hiding under their bed.

Harry snorted, "obscene?"

"You only just started courting, and there's talk of you sleeping in his bed, and I know you, I know you aren't, you know...loose. And the whole school knows that Tom is the picture of gentlemen-hood. It's just..."

"A rumor, Alphard. It's a rumor. I'm not upset by it." Harry gave him a reassuring smile as he tossed the office catalogue down and picked up a clothing one in turn. He had very few people on his shopping list this year, yet that somehow made the whole thing harder.

From across the bed Alphard made a sound like a dying walrus and flopped face first into the satiny green coverlet.

Harry could only sigh and keep looking at the catalogues Orion had so generously let them borrow. He couldn't very well tell Alphard that he had been dodging accusations of promiscuity since he was fourteen, and was now a pro at not letting gossip eat at him.

He and Tom might not have been doing much in the physical realm. Tom was still the Head Boy, and they both had school to think of. But at night, well, if hands strayed and things became decidedly PG-13, that was only between the two of them.

"How would a Hufflepuff even know if I had shared a room with Tom?"

He had meant for it to be rhetorical. The answer being that there was no way a Hufflepuff would know. Hufflepuffs didn't visit Slytherin's common room, even if they were on good terms with other house. What he got instead was Alphard sliding his face to the side that he could mutter into Harry's duvet.

"I heard he got it from Abraxas."

Slowly, Harry closed the catalogue and sat it down. There was,

perhaps, a chance that Abraxas had seen Harry slip from Tom's room one morning. They had only shared a bed the twice, but it would be enough. He worried his bottom lip for a second, collecting his thoughts, then, "Alphard, why is everyone acting strangely around Malfoy lately?"

Alphard sat up so fast a few of the catalogues scattered off the bed. Alphard used the distraction to both keep from answering and to hide the sudden flush of his cheeks.

"Alphard," Harry prompted again, crossing his arms over his chest as he waited him out.

Alphard took an unnecessary amount of time lining up the catalogues and stacking them in a neat pile. When there was nothing else to do but acknowledge Harry he did so with a sigh and shifting, nervous eyes. "He just...had a falling out."

"A 'falling out'?" Harry asked flatly, "with who?"

"With...well..."

"With Tom?" Considering that Tom had been acting as though Abraxas didn't exist since...well, since that night, it was pretty obvious what was really going on.

"With Tom," Alphard echoed, then gave a twitchy shrug, "with everyone."

Harry cocked his head to the side, "Everyone?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

Harry huffed, he let his arms flop down to his sides, "because Tom told everyone to stay away from him and now they are." It was not a question, it didn't need a confirmation. It was clear as the water just above their heads.

"Well, no. Not really," Alphard had a little more wind in his sails now that the topic had been breached, "he did something that was against the house rules, and everyone decided they didn't want anything to do with him anymore. Same with his friends...the Roberts."

Harry was weighing the options of letting Alphard know that he knew that Abraxas, and his possible dual shadows the Roberts were behind his attack, when the door to the room opened and a group of his

roommates came bustling in. Several wore quidditch uniforms and soon the boisterous talk of their practice and up coming game smothered any peace they'd had before.

Harry turned back to the catalogues and Alphard followed suit. He was scanned the booklets listless, trying to decide how he felt that an entire house would snub someone for him. In his defense.

Despite what Alphard said Harry was pretty sure this was Tom once more. He even knew why Tom would do it. In his own way he must see it as protecting Harry. Keeping him from being afraid that there was someone in their house, just down the hall, who meant Harry harm.

It was sweet...in it's own way.

Harry turned a page, and there it was. Page 50 of Wizardly Wardrobes, item #548. It was perfect. Taking up a pen Harry marked the page and item number on a scrape of parchment, and mentally took a name off his shopping list.

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The holidays were far from Tom's favorite time of the year. He'd had little choice but to stay at the school when he first arrived as an unnamed orphan from muggle London. Even after he'd begun to make a name for himself as being the top student there were no invitations for him to spend the holidays with his Slytherin fellows. It wasn't until he opened the Chamber, until he had proven his place as Slytherin's Heir that pure-blood families were vying for him to come pay them a visit.

Young, though he may have been, the Lords and Ladies of the pure-blood families understood the importance of his arrival. That it would behoove them to get within his good graces. That when he was of age, and the time was right, Tom would turn the Wizarding Word on its head.

Of course they all had their own ideas as to how he would do such a thing. Many thought his goals would involve the ministry, and needing to call in favors from them and their money and influences. It was a fine plan, it simply wasn't Tom's. Such a path would be too

strict. It would present him with rules he had to follow. Rules that were not his own. Rules and regulations that would take years and years to work around and undermine.

Tom had a plan, alright. And it did not involve him being indebted to anyone or for anything.

A large part of his plan would fall into place during the Winter Break. He had some loose ends to tie, some declarations to make, and a possible connection to forge. Tom had always been fantastic about getting the things he wanted. Making his dreams and wants a reality. It had gotten easier since he had learned about magic. Yet even before that when there was something that Tom Riddle wanted, he worked hard until he got it.

And then, there was Harry.

Harry wasn't an obstacle. He was far too precious to Tom for him be thought of in such a way. But he had a way of making Tom's plans...fuzzy. Sometimes Tom would go days without thinking of the next steps he would take. Whole spans of time where the only thing Tom could think of were a pair of bright green eyes and a glowing smile, and what he might do in the future to keep Harry happy.

But Tom still had his plans. He still had people who were waiting on the Heir of Slytherin to step forward and lead them all to greatness.

No, Harry wasn't an obstacle exactly. But he had certainly put a wrench in Tom's plans.

Harry wasn't leaving for the break. Of course he wasn't, he had no family to go to, and Headmaster Dippet frowned on students spending holidays in Diagon Alley unsupervised.

For many reasons this was a good thing. The pure-bloods always went home, which meant that most of the dorm would be barren. The chance to spend nearly a whole month alone with Harry was a dream come true. The problem...Tom had planned to use that time to...get acquainted with lost relatives. Now he needed to come up with a plan to get around his intended long enough to step out unnoticed for a few hours.

He had not, as of yet, figured it all out.

But the days were getting shorter, the endless and bitter rain had turned to hazy falls of snow, and Slytherin's first Quidditch match of

the year was upon them. Any planning he thought he might have been able to manage during the match was dashed with another raucous roar and wave of green and silver as those around them stood and cheered.

Even Harry had lost himself to the festive air as he jumped to his feet to cheer whenever a goal was blocked on their part, or when Alphard or another chaster managed to score on the Ravenclaws.

It wasn't even a terribly interesting match, so far as Tom could tell. The Ravenclaw team never had the same level of fierce dedication that the other houses did. There was none of the rivalry that rested between the them and the Griffindors, nor the festive fun that came from their matches with Hufflepuff. And yet, Harry hung onto every little move of the match as though it were the World Cup.

Madam Godfrey called a timeout after a particularly dubious hit from one of their beaters, and Tom took the opportunity to pull Harry into his arms and settle them back into their seats.

"Enjoying the match?" Tom asked with a fond smile.

Harry huffed, sounding more frustrated than anything else, "we're doing a pretty good job of keeping Ravenclaw from scoring, but so far it's been mostly luck. They aren't very showy, but they are methodical. They'll get in eventually." His sigh was certainly more from frustration at that point, the rosiness of his cheeks possibly due in part to his frantic explanation than just the cold. Tom snugged the scarf he was wrapped in a little tighter either way.

"It is usually their way, to build momentum as the matches go on," he was more than a little impressed that Harry had figured this out when the match had only been going for twenty minutes so far. He had not forgotten Harry's sleepy confession to having played as seeker for some unknown team, and he knew his stuff when it came to Quidditch. Tom hummed softly to himself and pressed Harry a little closer to his side, "We're still far enough ahead that if we catch the snitch it won't matter."

Harry threw his arms up and wailed in frustration, "that's part of the problem though! I've already seen the snitch four times! Four, Tom! Four! And once it was right underneath Warner's left foot and he didn't even know!"

Tom was taken a little aback by that. He hadn't noticed anything, not that he had been riveted to the match, but, unless Harry was the only

one to have seen it in the whole stadium, he usually cought on to things like that.

"Perhaps you should talk to Yaxley about it. If our seeker is falling behind then it would be best to replace him. Maybe with someone far more observant." He winked down at Harry who blushed in turn before looking away.

"Oh...I...I don't know about playing, myself, but..."

"It's only a suggestion, besides, it's Warner's last year, you don't have to make any decisions now, but, if in the future it was something you became interested. Beside, letting the captain know that someone on our team is under preforming is to everyone's benefit. Either he works with the weak links to fix them, or he will replace them with someone better."

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to talk to him about it," Harry said thoughtfully, then a little smile curved his lips, "It might be fun to talk Quidditch with someone other than Alphard for a change," he laughed softly, "all he ever wants to talk about is how many goals he can make."

Tom leaned back, encouraging Harry to rest against him as he spoke animatedly about things he would like to talk to Yaxley about with the team, when the whistle was blown and the match started back up once more Harry did all his cheering and excited banter from the warmth and comfort of Tom's arms.

The morning after the match saw those going home for the holidays off on thestrall pulled carriages to board the train. When he had first arrived at Hogwarts it had a been a bitter sweet moment. The castle had quickly become more of a home to him than anywhere else on earth, he had not wanted to leave it. Not for anything. But seeing everyone leaving, bright smiles and eager for family and things he had never known...had left Tom bitter and resentful.

Something he had worked hard to, not forget, exactly, but to put firmly behind him as the years progressed. As he began to receive gifts from his classmates, then invitations, the annoying birthday presents after Alphard snooped through Slughorn's files and let slip the date to his friends.

Not that year though. Not now.

The castle was eerily silent without it's students, the only places of light and life were the Great Hall and common rooms. It went beyond the quiet of walking the halls at night, when the heartbeat of the castle rested behind hidden doors and within high towers. Banked and sleeping, ready to rise in the light of day. The wide halls never truly felt empty when the dorms were full.

Yet it had never felt quite so peaceful as it did then. With just Tom and Harry as they walked the halls, or sat curled next to each other by the fire in the evening. All but a few of the student had left for the break, there wasn't a soul that had stayed behind under the age of fifteen, all of whom left Harry and Tom alone to enjoy the holiday in peace. Most choosing to go to other dorms, visiting friends. A concept which seemed to both delight and confuse Harry.

That first night they had lingered by the fire in the common well into the evening, the rest of those left behind either already in their beds, or off in another part of the castle, and for once it was not Tom's responsibility to keep an eye on them. He and Harry had begun the evening in their respective chairs, Harry curled up and turned away from the fire to look at Tom, they had simply talked of random things.

Not their pasts. Not Christmas' before, as one might think. Tom had no special winter moments of which to speak of. No treasured and caring memories of snowed in days and the warmth and love of a family, and Harry had shied away from Tom's one attempt to get such stories from him. The bright spark of sadness that accompanied the rebuff kept Tom from asking again. It was not simply an attempt to hide his past. Perhaps like Tom he had no good memories to share.

Eventually the space between them became too much for Tom, the room too quiet to not take advantage of, and he began to lure Harry over to Tom's chair. First with light touches to Harry's foot, which was dangling over the side of the chair arm. Then with soft words and promises of warmth, he looked awfully cold sitting over there alone. Finally Tom leaned forward enough to, gently, pull Harry from his scrunched up position on the other chair and into Tom's lap, where he relaxed into Tom's arms almost instantly.

Harry rested his head on Tom's shoulder, and his eyes began to slid shut. Tom rested his cheek on Harry's head, "if you are tired then we should go to sleep."

Harry hummed, "comfy here."

"We would be more comfortable in bed, don't you think?" Tom said, laughing softly.

"Can't sleep together, Tom...people will talk," his words were slurred a bit, and he hadn't opened his eyes back up, yet there was nothing but determination coming from him.

"there's no one here, Harry, who will talk?"

"Abraxas."

"Abraxas is home with is family. There is nothing for him to see." Not right now anyway. Tom had not been deaf to the chatter around them. He was well aware that someone had seen Harry leave his room in the morning on at least one occasion. "Why would it even matter? Slughorn is not in the castle, and he would not say something if he were. Therefore, I see no reason to hide."

Harry opened his eyes and gave Tom an incredulous look, "Alphard said that it was inappropriate for courting couples to-"

"For Alphard, who is from a very old and very traditional pure-blood family, it would be scandalous for him to go around kissing anyone that his family did not set up for him," Tom said swiftly, "for us, as we are alone with no nosy relatives trying to find us the best match, it is up to us to determine what is or isn't appropriate for ourselves." Lightly, he ran a finger over the curve of Harry's cheek, resting it at last on the tip of his nose. "As much as I appreciate that Alphard was willing to give you courting lessons, all the rules do not apply to us."

Harry squinted at him for a moment, then seemed to come to terms with what Tom said, either because he believed, or simply figured that Tom would do as he pleased either way.

In truth, as Tom knew which pure-blood family he was from, he could call on the traditions. In this case he would need to go to the head of another pure-blood family and ask them to oversee the courting. It would drag everything out to excruciating levels, and Tom and Harry would lose the privacy they enjoyed now. Someone would always be watching to make sure rules were followed and no boundaries crossed. And they would not be able to move forward as a couple without the consent of their overseer.

There was no way Tom was going to go down that path.

Harry worried his lip for a moment, then asked, "are you sure?"



In response Tom leaned down, pulling Harry closer to him and kissed him. Soothing over Harry red bitten lips with his tongue before deepening the kiss into something slow and impassioned. Harry relaxed further, melting under the attention, curling his fingers into Tom's robes. When he pulled back they were both a little pressed for breath.

Tom held him close, resting their foreheads together, "The only opinion I'm concerned with is yours."

"Okay," Harry whispered, and smiled a mischievous little grin, "I think I'm ready for bed now."

Tom helped Harry up and led the way through the common room and down the long, silent hall to his room. Heart beating frantically in his chest.

It was silly. They had been alone together more times than Tom could count, if one counted the endless nights they shared in the dream state. And since Tom had begun courting Harry in true, once Harry's health had improved, they had moved on from simply kissing to something he had once heard Alphard refer as 'heavy petting', before Orion had made him be silent on the subject.

Yet there was something about now, this time, that, even though it was left unsaid, was completely different. Tom had witnessed very few passionate moments between others in his life. When he was young he had once walked in on a couple of older children at the orphanage who were rather forcefully snogging each other in an empty room Tom had tried to seek quiet in. But such things did not happen often, and this was nothing like that.

After a quick trip into the sixth year dorm for a few of Harry's things, and after the door was shut tight and locked behind them, Harry excused himself to the lavatory to prepare for bed, and Tom...Tom wasn't quite sure what to do with himself.

He should get ready for bed as well. But he hesitated over the wardrobe long enough for Harry to emerge from the lavatory, carrying his toiletry bag in one hand his bundled robes from the day in the other. Since the weather had become drastically cooler within the walls of the castle Harry had foregone the thin silk undergarments that he had worn before for a thicker, though incredibly soft, woolen set. It was these that he wore as he made his way over to the bed, dropping his arm load of things into a nearby chair.

"You can keep them in the wardrobe," Tom said hurriedly, fighting not to blush at the outburst as Harry turned to him with a raised brow. He cleared his throat and said in a softer, calmer voice, "there's no reason for you to have to use the chair, you can hang your robes up, and keep your bag in the wardrobe, or in the cabinet in the lavatory."

Harry regarded him curiously for a moment, before a smirk broke out on his face and he crossed the room to slide his arms around Tom's neck, "that sounds awfully like you're asking me to move in."

"I wouldn't mind," Tom said in return, bringing his own arms around Harry's waist, "if you wanted to keep some things here."

Harry laughed softly, stretching up on his tip toes he kissed Tom gently on the lips. Tom held him close, keeping him in place and proceeded to deepen the kiss, until the angle grew uncomfortable and he maneuvered them over to the bed. Somewhere between the kiss' start and ending up under the covers with Harry in his arms, Tom had managed to lose his own robe. It had been tossed somewhere on the floor.

But he couldn't be bothered with it right then. Not while he was busy exploring every inch of Harry that he was able. The wild meadow of his scent, the almost sweet taste of his skin as Tom explored his neck and bared shoulder, where to touch to have him arch off the bed or cause his breath to hitch.

For a beautiful moment, that was his world. Delighting in giving pleasure, being more caught up in seeing to Harry than his own needs. Yet there was nothing more precious, nothing at all under the sun that he rather be doing or a place he would rather be.

As close as they had become, as much as they had come to trust one another, both learning to be open, exploring each other in the freedom of the dreamscape. This is all new, very real, territory. Tom smoothing his hands down Harry's body, caressing places he had come to adore, amazed at the new sensations. The heat from Harry's body, the softness of his cashmere shift, the smooth skin of his thigh. Tom slowed at the hem of the shift, giving Harry enough time to tell him to stop, but it never came.

The moan that broke from Harry when Tom took him in hand was better than the finest music, the bright spark of pleasure that surged to Tom through Harry's very soul was more exquisite than any gratification that Tom had ever felt. He stole Harry's lips for another

deep, bliss filled kiss to keep his own groans of pleasure silent, as carefully, and with much satisfaction, he brought them to a gasping, trembling completion.

Tom rested his forehead on Harry's once more, catching his own breath, with a wave of a hand he set them both to rights, magically cleaned enough that neither had to think about moving for a while.

Tom traced a finger softly over the delicate planes of Harry's face until he opened bright green eyes at him. Tom had no words for that moment, all he could think to do was kiss Harry once more. A slow press of lips that he hoped spoke for him all that he could not say .

Harry was smiling when he pulled away, he leaned up enough to kiss Tom back, then curled into his arms, resting his head on Tom's chest. Tom waved once more and the lights dimmed, he was almost asleep when Harry spoke, soft and low into the dark.

"Me too."

In the morning Tom cleared out room for Harry's things in his room.

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Harry insisted that they couldn't spend their days hidden inside Tom's bedroom. First off they would miss all their meals, and skipping on food was not something he was keen on doing now that he was feeling well once more. For another reason, they both had homework, and he had claimed that just because Tom could probably do both their workload all on his own, Harry probably needed to learn the things himself and thus they needed to at least go to the library once a week.

Tom could not find it in himself to deny Harry these things. Nor that they spend a portion of every evening before the fire.

Or when he suggested they take walks. Or simply sit in a cozy nook somewhere on in castle.

Tom found he had a hard time denying Harry most things, and found more and more that he did not mind giving in to him.

In a blink of an eye the week was over and they were waking up on

Christmas morn. Harry sleeping nearly on top of Tom, and Tom with his arms wrapped securely around Harry's waist, as had become their custom. At the foot of his bed rested two neat little piles of gifts. One slightly smaller than the other.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," Tom said softly, sitting up with Harry in his arms.

Harry rubbed his eyes, and said, "Happy Christmas," though a yawn. Tom had no choice but to kiss him then.

He scooted them to the end of the bed and lifted a familiar green package from the top of the smaller pile, holding it out for Harry, "for you, my dear."

Harry smiled, sleepy but very pleased. He took the package but instead of opening it reached over, wobbling from his precarious perch on Tom's lap, to pluck a package wrapped in a very similar shade of dark green from Tom's stack.

"And this is for you."

Tom took it, on a little tag under the silver bow was written, 'From: Harry <3,'

"We'll open them together," Harry suggested, already picking at the bow of his own package.

Tom wanted to watch Harry's reaction when he uncovered the elegant silver bracelet that Tom had found for him. The links twisted and curved in a snake-like manner and it was encrusted with little emeralds. It was perfect and breathtaking. Just like Harry.

But he didn't want to go against Harry's wishes. So, keeping one eye on Harry as he unwrapped his gift, Tom pulled the silver ribbon and let his own fall open.

The little box was small, like the one Tom's own gift was in, but instead of a bracelet, or something else a little more flashy, a small silver ring with a simple inlaid emerald rested inside. Tom took the ring with slightly numb fingers, turning it over to see....exactly what he expected.

Engraved along the bottom and sides of the ring were two sets of initials. TMR on one side, and HJE on the other.

"Do you like it?"

Tom looked up to find Harry, still in his lap, his small hands clutched around his own gift, bright eyes focused only on Tom. "Alphard told me it was traditional, but if-"

"I love it," Tom said swiftly...and he did. It was traditional. Something that pure-bloods gave each other to show that they were courting. Usually only one person wore a courting ring, and it was in that moment that Tom realized if he were ever in a situation that called for one, he would want to be the one that wore it.

Carefully he slid the cool ring onto his finger, admiring how the little gem caught the wan light from the lake above and sent it back, a bright flash of green for all to see. "I shall wear it always." He had never meant anything more in his life.

Once that was settled he looked to Harry, raising an inquisitive brow at the box pressed close to his chest.

"Oh, right," Harry said with a smile, letting the box fall open once more on his lap, he looked up at Tom with wide grin. "I guess we were thinking along the same lines."

"Great minds," Tom said easily, he took the bracelet from the box and held it out for Harry's wrist, "I'm afraid it isn't engraved."

Harry snorted softly, "I doubt anyone will have trouble figuring out where it came from."

"Indeed," Tom smiled when Harry laughed at that. Taking another gift from each pile he settled them more comfortably, with Harry pressed to him, back to chest and Tom leaned up against one of the bedposts. "Now, let's finish up here and go have some breakfast. I have a very important gift I'm dying to show off."

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On the other side of the castle, up a few towers and down several corridors, Dumbledore rested on an old, yet rather squishy, chintz chair by a roaring fire.

It had become his habit to spend this particular day away from the crowd, as it were. Those that tended to stay at Hogwarts over the winter did so not only because they loved the old castle, but because they often had nowhere else to go. And though he enjoyed the company of his colleagues and the children, it was often difficult for him to remain cheery for long.

Especially on this day. When it was harder to ignore all that he had lost, and all that he still stood lose.

Especially this year. With the war getting closer, and Gellert gaining power.

There was a small stack of gifts on his desk. They arrived every year, first thing in the morning. A collection of brightly papered parcels from the other staff. It was always something like new quills and brightly colored inks, or potions for health, energy, or mental clarity. Horribly practical and bland.

He chose to leave them for later, a glass of brandy in hand and an open tomb on advanced transfiguration on the table at his elbow, which he had sat down hours ago in favor of a rather racey and intriguing novella he had picked up outside of a muggle bookshop in London that seemed to follow the life of some sort of detective, who was doing a better job of falling head over heels for the damsel in distress than he was at solving her case.

He was well into a scene involving the lead suspect pointing one of those little muggle projectile weapons at the detective, when the stack of gifts promptly fell off the desk with a loud crash.

Dumbledore jolted, nearly spilling the brandy over his book as he turned to see what the commotion was. There, perched on the desk and looking for all the world as though nothing was amiss, was Fawks.

"What the blazes is going on, then?"

Fawks simply turned his head to regard Dumbledore dubiously, blinking molten gold eyes at him.

"Well?" He asked again, "it's very rude to knock things off of desks," he said sternly, though it hardly mattered much. He sat down his drink and took out his wand, and quickly set the table back to rights. "Now, if you'll excuse me." With that, he flicked the book back open, and went back to his sorrowful detective.

A few moments later there was yet another soft thump as something else fell from the desk to the floor. With a great sigh he turned back to his vexing familiar, ready to scold him yet again. But it was only the one pack this time, and instead of sitting upon the desk as though he had done nothing wrong, Fawks was on the floor, nudging the little package with his gilded beak.

"What have you there, now?" Dumbledore rose and took the pack from the floor, it was wrapped in red paper with little gold snitches dancing merrily across. A tag rested next to the disproportionately large golden bow, it read, "To: Professor Dumbledore, From: Harry J Evans."

"Isn't that something." he said softly, it wasn't that students never gave him anything. Occasionally something wanted to send him a gift in the hopes that it would help with their grades. But Harry had been doing quite well in his class, and other than their first meeting, they had not spoken overly much.

It was for the best. He seemed like a good boy, but if he knew Dumbledore in a near, or even distant future, it would be too dangerous for them to interact too much. And even though he seemed to be adjusting well Dumbledore couldn't help but feel some measure of guilt everytime he saw Harry walking the halls. He hadn't been able to find a way to get him back to his original time, and was growing less certain as the days, weeks, and now months passed in which no one had an solution.

Dumbledore shook his head and made his way back to his comfy chair by the fire. It was all just another layer of stress and anxiety there to weigh him down. Harry had taken a liking to Tom, who was far too cunning for Dumbledore's tastes. He had a way of luring others to his side, a particular power that, if left to grow, could one day spell trouble.

Dumbledore sat down with the little package. He stretched his feet out to the fire, and tried to relax, unsure what to think. Tom would never send him something, he was perpetually upset that Dumbledore had seen him as a child, seen through the calm facade he wanted to show everyone. He would probably never forgive or forget that. So what then could Tom's newest, and by all accounts, closest confidant have sent him?

Inside the red and gold paper was a little brown box, inside that, tucked between folds of thin white paper was first a little paper pouch of candies. They were about the size of a small acorn, bright yellow in

color, and smelled of fresh lemons. Perplexed, yet intrigued, Dumbledore sat them aside and pulled the next item from the box.

It was a pair of thick, woolen socks.

He simply held them, mouth agape as he took them in. They were extremely soft, and the quality was unquestionable. But they were also a shocking shade of violet up at the top that faded into a equally bright shade of hot pink. Under the socks was a single piece of parchment, a note written in a slightly messy hand.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I wanted to thank you for all your help earlier this year, please be assured that I am enjoying my time here and have settled in well.

I do hope you enjoy the lemon drops. They are a muggle candy that I've had a few times and I thought you might like them. And I do hope that the socks are to your liking.

Everyone needs a good pair of socks.

I hop you have a Happy Christmas

Harry Evans

After a brief moment of shock, Dumbledore found himself chuckling softly. The Letter, the socks, the candy. It was possible the best gift he had ever received. He popped one of the tart candies in his mouth and reclined further into his seat, a moment later his lap was full of warm red and cold feathers.

"Who knows, Fawks," he said as he began to pet Fawks absently, "maybe Harry will end up being able to influence Tom instead."

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovelies!!

Sorry this took so long, but I'm moved, and now that this nightmare of a chapter is over we can move on!!

The little inbetween chapters are the hardest, but timeline wise we are where we need to be for the real action to start!!

Shout out to everyone in the comments in last chapter being scared that things are going to take a dark turn. It's funny because while writing the last chapter I also stopped for a moment and

was like, wait, things are going too well, something bad is going to happen. And I already know what's going to happen! Not sure why it felt like such a shock!

I don't have much to say about this chapter. It needed to get done so we can move on, I hope it was enjoyable enough.

Now, in March Diamond Winters is hosting another Harry Potter Omegaverse Week. You might remember some of my stories from last year, such as [In the Shadows](#) or [Wings of Stained Glass and Iron](#) to name a few.

We would really appreciate it if you guys could go [vote](#) on the themes of the week and we would love to see some stories and artwork from any who might want to participate!

I'm already thinking of a story inspired by *The Starless Sea* by Erin Morgenstern which I just read and adore!!! (Go read it and tell me how much you love it)

Okay, so happy early Valentine's Day to all of you, happy belated birthday to me (it was the 10th)

You guys are so awesome! Even when it's taking me longer than normal to post. Thank you so much for your support!!

And I look REALLY REALLY forward to

Next TIME!!

Tom meets his long lost relatives

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Tom meets his father

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone who wished me a happy birthday!
And a special thank you to all who voted for the themes for the Harry Potter omegaverse week!
The results are up and I hope to see some wonderful stories and art!!

Now, please enjoy this chapter that I have been waiting to write for a year!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Those chill December days were the best of Tom's life. They answered to know one, and nothing. They lounged in one another's company and basked in the glow of new and passionate love, and though he had not found the words to say it, Tom was more hopeful for the future than he had ever been before.

But there were still paths he needed to cross before things were set. He had made plans, and plans were meant to be kept. It had taken exacting and careful thought, but when he woke on the morning of the 30th he was ready for what was to come.

Assuming that mixed within his lessons of pure-blood courting etiquette, Alphard had also let slip when Tom's birthday was, he had planned accordingly. Where he had once thought to set out on the 31, celebrate the day of his birth by meeting his father and creating yet another link to immortality, it was far to risky now. If Harry had anything planned for that day he could not simply get out of it. They had no deadlines, nothing hanging over their heads that he could use to slip away.

And the thought of lying to his beloved left a rather unpleasant taste in his mouth.

Instead he had devised a brilliant solution. Sometime after dinner the night before Tom had received a missive from his summertime employer, Mr Borgin, asking for Tom's urgent help the next day. If he

could possibly pop into the shop for an hour or two in the morning Mr Borgin would be in his debt.

Harry had wanted to come with him. Of course. They could not stay outside of the castle, but little day trips, for Tom, at least, were permitted. Harry wasn't yet seventeen and could not go off on his own. But Tom managed to talk him into staying and working on essay he had yet finish for potions.

It had all fallen perfectly into plan, and so, with careful attention to his appearance, which would not be out of place if he were gong to work, Tom prepared himself for what he must do.

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Harry cursed under his breath as he slid, once again on the stairs. Someone had left the windows leading up from dungeons to the library open, and thus creating perfect patches of ice hidden for unsuspecting feet.

This wouldn't be a problem except that he had left his notes in Tom's room the night before. He could probably push through without them, but he'd had a great line in there about nightshade that had made Tom roll his eyes, and Gemma laugh, and he just knew that Slughorn would love it...yet he couldn't quite remember the specifics.

And so, Harry trudged his way back through the halls, cold and miserable, and trying to not think of Tom. Which just made him feel colder and more miserable. It was only for the morning. He could be alone for a few hours. It wasn't but a few months ago that all he wanted was to be alone. He had pined for some quite, to have no one watching him, nothing to do, no demands on his head.

Now he wanted Tom. He's arms, his warms, his company. He was sweet in a way that Harry had never though possible. For anyone, let alone someone who had once grown up to be the worst dark lord of all time.

He didn't want to pat himself on the back when things were still so fresh between them, but Harry was pretty sure he had already set in motion a time where hundreds of people didn't end up dying because of Lord Voldemort.

He was, perhaps, just a bit proud of himself.

Tom's room opened for him instantly, though the lock was still in place. He hadn't asked, yet he was rather certain that Tom had keyed Harry's magical signature into the room's locks while he was sleeping one morning. Either way, he no longer needed Tom there to access the room.

They had grown comfortable in the last few weeks. Harry's things were now scattered about Tom's once perfect space. Here and there were one of his stockings or a discarded robe that he had yet to be placed back in the wardrobe or left in the hamper for the house elves to wash. Harry's comb rested on the table near fireplace, where he liked to sit in the evenings getting ready for bed. Harry's school books were neatly lined up next to Tom's on a shelf, and Harry's homework and notes were sat in a messy heap on the desk. In his haste to get the notes and be back in the library, Harry accidentally knocked several other stacks of paper off the desk to sweep across the floor.

With a pained sigh he fell to his hands and knees to corral all the many papers and folders that Tom used back into some semblance of the order they were in. Tom liked to keep things in folders and files, and it was very much something that Hermione would approve of, which made Harry's chest tight when he saw it. But as much as he enjoyed Tom's attention to detail, some of his filing was odd and he hadn't really tried to figure it out.

Something that was more annoying now, that he had knocked several folders down and scattered their contents to the wind.

Did Ancient Runes notes go in the folder marked M-A or A-P? And these notes on antidotes for a poison from some kind of feathered asian raptor didn't seem to belong anywhere.

He had just managed to round up all of the homework and notes for DADA and was feeling rather accomplished when he spotted something a little odd under the desk.

This folder, though opened, seemed to have stayed intact, but what was rather strange was the photo within. Right there, staring up at nothing was a picture of Tom...or so it looked.

The man in the photo was older, though not by any means old. He had a few fine lines around his eyes, and the beginning of grey at his temples. And this picture of an older Tom Riddle wasn't moving.

A muggle photo.

...A muggle man.

This was...Tom's father. The man from the locket. The man from...

Suddenly it was dark, and cold, and fear was clawing its way up Harry's throat as he looked up to the stone he had been tied to. The words Tom Riddle etched for a blazing moment across his eyes. There were dates under it, and some saying underneath that Harry had been unable to see fully. Try as he might he could never seem to remember what the dates were specifically.

The cold didn't lift as his vision cleared, it grew. A sick certainty taking root in the pit of his stomach as he turned the page, another photo of an older muggle couple is attached to a document that seemed to be their whole lives laid bare. Everything from their address to their bank statements and what they studied in schools, to charities they supported.

There was only one reason Harry could think of as to why Tom would have it, and the answer only brought more dread. Perhaps Tom did go to Borgin and Burke's that morning. There could have been something that he was needed for, and the owners would know that Tom was on a break from school. It could add up.

Harry could send an Owl, something silly for Tom to get at the shop, maybe asking if he'd seen Harry's History homework, or something. He could wait for a reply that possibly wouldn't come. Or.

It was likely that Tom appeared wherever he went, and if it wasn't to Knockturn Alley then Harry wasn't sure how he was supposed to find him. He had been to Little Hangleton before, not by choice and he had no clue how to get back. He couldn't appear yet...and waiting around for Tom to return and just hoping he hadn't been doing what Harry feared was not an option.

He looked around at the mess of scattered papers helplessly, wishing beyond hope that there was something there that could aid him in...

He whipped his head back to the folder on Tom's family. Everything he needed was there, right in black and white. The Address! All he needed was a floor...

There were a few floors that stayed open for use in the school, or there had been...or no...there would be. Eventually, and might now. But

which one could he use now?

There was really only one answer to that question, so he pulled himself up off the floor and raced out of Tom's room to the common room. There was an oft neglected door hidden just to the side of the study area that no one ever approached. No one ever really looked at it. There was no need. Their head of house had never, as of yet, used the door to his private office to gain entry into their dorms. But it was there. Just waiting.

Fortune must have been on his side as he entered the empty room, the only soul around being Gemma on her little perch. Her head tilted to the side as she followed his movements across the room and to the door to Slughorn's office.

"Is bad manners," her hiss was just loud enough to carry through the silent air.

Harry paused with his hand on the door, "what is?"

"To go into a room without permission," she hissed haughtily, leaving the front of her body up and off the perch, a mimicry of standing upright.

He supposed that she was right, there, he didn't have permission, and perhaps she had heard someone, maybe even Slughorn himself, say that one needed permission to go in. Which he didn't have. What he did have was a time frame that was quickly growing smaller and smaller.

"I have to," he said hastily, "it's for Tom!"

She perked up at that, "Tom?" She always did like Tom.

"Yes, Tom's in trouble and the only way I can help him is through here!" Both things were true enough, and it wasn't. It odd that even in times of panic he could still feel good about not lying to an oddly maternal snake.

"Well if it's for Tom, to help him, then I suppose it's okay," she curled down closer to the perch, "the password is pineapple."

"Oh...thanks." Password? He looked to the door, then back to Gemma. "Would you like to come?"

"Where are going? Is it cold?"

"Yes, well, it's snowing out, but-"

"Then no," Gemma said flatly before she slipped right off of the perch and onto her heated rock where she curled into a ball as though to hight light her point.

"Okay, then," Harry turned back to the door, and feeling a little foolish, uttered a soft, "pineapple," at the glistening wood.

The door swung forward into the office on the silent hinges...well...that was lucky.

He pushed the door open slowly at first, careful of any movement in the room. But there was none. Slughorn had made sure everyone knew he would not be around for the holidays, at least until the Yule Ball. Yet there had sill been a part of Harry ready to be scolded for breaking and entering.

Techincaly a snake gave him the password and thus he was not 'breaking'. A distinction that probably wouldn't get hm far with anyone if he were caught.

He had never been in Slughorn's office before, but he would know who it belonged to even if he hadn't sought it out. Every piece of furniture was made of heavy dark wood and polished to high sheen, and anything that could be upholstered in rich leather, was. There were shelved of books and shelves of potions in all shades, colors, sizes, and variants of luminosity. And yet another shelf that seemed to be dedicated just to different types of alcohol. All of which he took in with a cursory look before swiftly crossing over to the cold hearth to search the myriad of bottles and small clay pots thereon for floo powder.

He finally found the shimmery green powder inside a squat ceramic penguin who's head popped off and acted as a lid, that he might have over looked if it hadn't been put back on lopsided.

With a tap of his wand a fire was lit, he consulted the bit of paper in his hend with the address before taking a deep breath and tossing the powder in the fire.

The flames blazed an acidic green.

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It was quaint. The sort of picturesque scene that one would find on a holiday card, or printed in one of those magazines that muggles seemed to enjoy that featured pictures of the upper class' lifestyle in ways that were meant as a boast about their wealth, as well as to make them seem attainable to others. He had seen a few in the matrons private room at the orphanage. It had confused him as a child, and now, standing before this tidy manor house that rested on a gentle hill overlooking a sleepy, snow blanketed village, all Tom could feel was rage.

As soon as his feet had touched the ice packed road and he had been enveloped in the bitter cold, the world around him falling into muted shades of green and grey from the gloom, the only emotion that he could find was pure, violent, anger.

There was a man behind those walls with his face. A man who was responsible for all the hardships of Tom's life. A man who shared his name, and his blood, and yet had still let Tom's mother die and Tom be taken in, not just worthless muggles, but by complete strangers.

He was Slytherin's Heir. He was the most powerful wizard of his age. He would be the most powerful Lord of all time. He should have been raised in a manner befitting his station, with recognition and all the knowledge of magic at his fingers from childhood. How far would he be now if he had not needed to catch up with his pure-blood or magically raised peers of lesser lineage?

Tom couldn't go back in time...he had looked into it. He couldn't start over, which meant he had no choice but to press on. And so, press on he shall. He would end this day having put a massive burden of his past behind him. He would enter the new year of his life one step closer to assure he would not meet the same mortal fate of his mother. He would be more powerful, and ready for when he was to take the wizarding world in hand and shape into something better.

The world was muted around him. The wind was soft, the village still sleeping, the only sound for what felt like miles was the soft crunch of snow under Tom's shoes as he climbed the small hill to the manor doors.

There were gold embellishments on the door and surrounding windows. They somehow managed to be stark and sharply bright in the low light of the rising sun, yet dark and muted to Tom's eye. When

he closed his eyes the lion doorknocker still sat before his lids.

Entering the house was beyond easy, muggles were truly so weak and vulnerable. This whole village could be dead before the sun had fully risen and no one would know for hours...days even. No one would ever know why or how. But Tom wasn't there to speculate on how easy it would be to conquer a world of muggles.

He had a smaller goal in mind right then.

Warmth swept over him as he walked through the door, though it did nothing to overcome the chill from his bones. There was a different gloom to the inside of the manor, one of half lit gaslights casting shadows from other rooms. It was clear this was not a path that the residents would be taking at this hours, and thus this part of their house showed only the bare bones of life.

Tom stalked down a hall carpeted in red and gold patterned persian rugs that appeared as shades of violet in the shadows, the walls were festooned with ancient oil paintings of people who occasionally shared some feature with Tom. The slope of his nose, the same sharp cheekbones or chiseled jaw. There was a painting of a young man who wore his hair in the exact same way Tom had his now.

At least they would know him when they saw him. There was something very pleasing about that. They would see and they would know, and Tom would have to do very little for them to know how much they had wronged him.

The hall forked off into three different directions, Tom took the left one, following the faint murmurs of voices and the tail tale clinking of cutlery on china plates.

The first person to see him was a servant girl as he walked into room. It was much less grand than he was expecting, a small room with single round table around which sat his father and grandparents, set for a small breakfast with the food and beverages laid out on a side board against a far wall. The little hearth by the table was blazing and crackling, providing a steadier, warmer light than the few gas lamps on the walls provided.

The girl, when she saw him, gasped and dropped a silver coffee pot. It hit the side of the lace covered table, splattering herself and who would be Tom's grandfather, with coffee before falling solidly onto the rug. No doubt ruining it as well.

"Francesca!" Mary Riddle scolded the poor girl, whipping her napkin from her lap to try and blot the scolding liquid from her husband's person. "Whatever has gotten into you?"

But the girl did not speak. Her dark eyes round in her pale face had not left Tom's since he'd entered, it didn't take long for the others to follow her gaze, to death standing in their doorway.

The faces of his grandparents were blank, frightened, then quizzical. Was it possible they had no knowledge of him? He turned instead to his father, there he found only fear.

"Good morning, father," Tom said evenly, "I do hope I am no intruding."

His father's mouth opened for a moment before snapping closed, yet it seemed the elder Thomas had no such problem finding his voice. "Father? Father! What- who is this, Tom?"

Tom laughed softly, "Forgive my rudeness, grandfather, let me introduce myself, I am Tom Marvolo Riddle jr," he gave both his grandparents his most winning, brightest smile, "I've been dying to meet you."

Something in his expression must have showed, for all three of them sat back straighter in their chairs, the scent of their fear filling Tom's senses along with the spilled coffee and quickly cooling breakfast fare. The little scullery girl, Francesca had scuttled off to hide under the buffet during Tom's introduction, and sat curled in a gently rocking ball.

"Tom?" Mary said in stunned alarm, though which Tom she was referring to was unknown.

Finally Tom snr seemed to find some form of back bone, he rose a shaking hand to point at Tom, "you! You! That woman!"

Tom grit his teeth, seething, "if you are referring to my mother."

"The witch!" Tom snr's voice was hoarse, but he still managed to roar admirably.

"Correct, she was a witch. Whom you left for dead along with your unborn child," Tom recounted the events as they stood. His mother had died giving birth to him and Tom Riddle the first had not been anywhere around, "now that we're all caught up," Tom said, taking a

few more steps into the room, placing himself before his family, he raised his wand to his father's chest, "it's time to repay the favor."

Power coursed through him. He knew the spell, the theory behind it. He felt the rage, the want, the need for the deed to be done. But Tom had never killed for his own gain before. This wasn't an accident left for him by a beloved pet. This was hardly even about revenge. This was pleasure. A setting to rights. For the first time Tom would kill to rid the world of a useless, evil hearted muggle,. The thought alone left him light headed and giddy.

"I will give you this opportunity," he said, heart racing with excitement, "to-"

His grand gesture of kindness to his undeserving father, to say his last words, to make some statement of remorse to Tom for his life and the part he played in it, was interrupted by the hearth sparking violently an instant before the flames turned green and spat out a red robed body right onto the tiles.

Just like that, Tom's world stopped. He was dizzy for an entirely new reason. He knew the small figure that was now coughing on the floor, he hadn't even registered that he had moved until he was taking Harry in his arms. He was warm and shaking, covered in soot and seemed be having a hard time gaining his breath. Tom took care of what he could. With a absent wave of his hand Harry's blood red robes were cleaned.

At the small fete of magic, Mary Riddle fell faint and slumped onto the table.

Thomas yelled, "Mary!" while Tom snr called out to his mother, and little Francesca released a pitiful wail from her hiding spot under the tureen of eggs.

Tom paid them no mind as he helped Harry rise from the floor, doing what little he could to help clear his lungs. "Harry," Tom scolded gently, "you didn't take a breath inside the floo, did you?" Had no one ever taught him to do it properly?

Harry coughed once more before taking a deep breath, he gave Tom a small, wobbly smile, "at least I ended up in the right place this time."

"You got sent to the wrong location?!..Harry, you have to be careful, the floo network is dangerous if misused."

"Tell me about it," Harry gave another forceful cough to get the last of the ash from his lungs, then his gaze swept over the rest of the room, "er...sorry for the intrusion."

Tom opened his mouth to inform Harry that he need to paste on pleasantries for this...this filth, but again he was too slow to react.

"Intrusion!" Tom snr yelled, rising from the table to face both Harry and Tom, his whole body still shaking as he gripped the caved back of his chair for support, knuckles starkly white against the dark wood.

"You're like her. The both of you. More...more witches!"

"Well, no...wizards, actually," Harry fumbled a little, he ran a hand through his now completely tousled hair. "Not that it matters...it's all the same really. So...yes?"

"You don't need to justify yourself to them, Harry."

"Well, we are sorta crashing their breakfast."

"Crash is right!" This from Thomas who was kneeling by the table, ineffectively fanning his wife with a linen napkin.

"It would be best if you two...freaks, would go back to where you came from," Tom snr said, having lost a little of his fear from the support of his chair.

Tom's fists clinched, he was halfway to reaching for his wand when something gripped his arm. Tightly. It took a long, shameful, moment for him to place the small pale hand as Harry's, even longer still before he could bring himself to meet saddened green eyes.

"It's okay," Harry said, voice low and soothing, "I know..I...it's not the first time I've had to deal with muggles who hate magic for no reason."

"No reason!" Harry's voice must not have been low enough, Tom snr's fear was quickly shifting to anger, his eyes blazed in the low light. He suddenly looked much older than his forty years that they file had claimed. "I assure you I have a very good reason, after what that woman, that demon, did to me!

"For years she tried to worm her way into the manor and into my bed, and at every turn I had to fend her off. For a while she was gone and I thought she must have finally moved off for good...then one day she

was back, and suddenly she..." he drifted off, his eyes going hazy and far away, it was a while before he gained the ability to speak once more, when he did his voice was much softer...far more tired. "I don't know what she did, but suddenly I loved her. Or I thought I did. It felt so real. So right. I moved us to another village for a time and we..."

He shook his head almost violently. "Then it was over. She came to me one morning and said she was with child, explained what she had done, and at first it didn't matter. It was Merope, and I loved her. Then it was gone. Whatever it was she had done to make me love her, it was simply..."

There was a roaring, dull but insistent in Tom's ears. It wasn't possible. The man was a liar!

"A potion?" Harry mused to himself, "I can't think of a spell that would have a lasting effect like that."

"It doesn't matter what you call it, it was torture!" Tom snr bellowed, chest heaving.

Tom's world was reeling, tilting one way and then another. His mother had tortured a muggle? Poisoned him in some way so that he would...marry her, impregnate her? He still hated the man before him. He still knew that Tom was his son and had never reached out to him, let him live a horrid, squalid life.

But he had not abandoned his wife.

He had ran from his....from his...rapist.

Tom shuddered, equal parts horror and revulsion.

Harry curled closer to him, lending Tom his warmth and his strength, making the world around him a little bit brighter, "we should go," he whispered, just for Tom.

He looked down at Harry. His Harry. His love. All his anger from before, his righteous rage, his need for revenge, was simply gone. A wobbly bubble that was well and truly popped. He nodded numbly, unsure of his voice at that time. Ignoring the others in the room, Tom wrapped Harry in his arms and led him back through the dark house.

"Should we...should we oblivate them, or...something?" Harry asked once they were outside. He had forgotten his cloak when he'd left...wherever he'd come from to find Tom. And wasn't that just

another conversation that Tom was not ready to have yet? How did Harry know to come there, looking for him?

He took his cloak off and wrapped it snugly around Harry, "I think they'll be fine...He's known about magic for at least eighteen years...I don't think they'll tell anyone."

Harry nodded, "I guess we need to head back?"

"There was...my uncle. My mother's brother," Tom said dully. He had meant to kick both sides of his family out in one day. Start fresh. He just...wasn't sure he had another meeting in him. He sighed deeply, "Morfing Gaunt, but..."

"You don't have to go, Tom. They don't," he took a deep breath, "family is not always what we want them to be."

Tom smiled, but it was hard, "yeah."

They headed down the hill together, Harry wrapped in his cloak, pressed his side, silent and steady. A much needed anchor in the choppy seas of Tom's life. At the bottom of hill he gave a thought to Morfin Gaunt. The last of the Gaunts, who had squandered their fortune, born magically weak, and were nearly gone.

There was nothing there for him. Everything Tom needed was already there, in his arms.

He wasn't ready to return to Hogwarts though. His mind was too full, he needed time to think.

There was a fountain just off the main street of Hogmead. Far enough away from the shops that no one would see them, close enough that if someone did they would just think he and Harry were out for a day shopping.

The fountain was magicked so that the water was warm and flowing even as the world around them was coated in a fresh layer of ice and snow.

Tom collapsed on the rim of the fountain, his head falling into his hands. It wasn't as though he thought he might have been wrong...exactly. It was that, it didn't feel right, all the sudden. He wasn't used to being confused. Tom Riddle did not get confused! He was presented with problems and he fixed them. End of story. There wasn't anything that could befall him without Tom coming out on top,

better and stronger for it.

"Tom?"

Oh, and now the shame was back.

It hadn't occurred to him that he might feel this way if Harry had found out about his plans. He had, of course, tried to keep them a secret. He wasn't going to tell Harry. At least, not until he had convinced Harry to seek immortality with him. That was not something he had realized about The Plan, until now. There was no future for him that did not have Harry in it, and thus, Harry needed to be assured eternal life as he himself was.

He lowered his hands, though he still could not bring himself to meet Harry's eyes. "How did you know to be there?" He asked one of the easier questions.

Harry was standing before him, hands clasped in front of his chest, "I knocked some papers off your desk...trying to find my notes and I saw, this file. I knew...I thought..."

Tom looked up, Harry wasn't clasping his hands, he was running his fingers over the bracelet Tom had given him with twists of his fingers. "You knew." He said softly. It was not a question.

Harry from the future knew, that today, Tom might be headed to Little Hangleton to see his father.

To...end his father's life.

He opened his mouth, just a second away from telling Harry what he knew. That Harry was from the future. It wasn't a conversation he knew Harry wanted, but then, they would be in very similar boats. He almost said it, I know you are from the future.

Before he got the chance lightning struck the fountain.

It was a clear day, it was too cold for rain and there wasn't a cloud in sight either way. But it hit again, forcing Tom from his perch as rock chipped away from the fountain head. With swiftness that belied his sluggish thoughts, Tom was up and standing between Harry and whatever was happening, his wand at the ready as the wind picked up around them, whipping ice and snow to sting against his face and unprotected hands.

The figurehead, a unicorn with water flowing from its gilded horn, was nothing but a inferno of electricity. The air popped and compressed, pushing on Tom's ears. Behind him Harry clung to his back, trying to pull Tom further away from the anomaly.

At its centre a dark mass began to coalesce, growing bigger and bigger, all sharp edges and too many curves. Then it fell, from the point of the unicorn's horn and right into the fountain. There was a giant splash, something that sounded much like a freight train, and the anomaly simply stopped.

Harry edged his way around Tom, though he still clung close, and Tom wasn't about to let him off alone. Together they drew closer to the wriggling, pulsating mass of black that now struggled in the fountain. His first thought was some hideous, demented dark creature. He wanted to keep Harry away from it as long as he could.

Then, the mass spoke.

"Get your elbow out of my kidney, Fred!"

Beside him, Harry stiffened.

"That's my elbow."

"That can't be your elbow, George" this voice, different than the first two, was a female, "you aren't anywhere near him."

"I don't know how any of you know what parts are yours or not," that voice was very much like the second one, but Tom, curious as he was about this talking mass, was more worried about Harry.

He was shaking at Tom's said, his white knuckled grip of Tom's arm bordering on painful.

"Harry?" he asked softly, now sure that they were seeing the effects of a portkey gone wrong. It really couldn't be anything else.

"Harry?" one of the male voice from the fountain exclaimed and suddenly the writhing mass of wet black broke apart and four figures began pulling themselves from the fountain. Three males with garish red hair and a third much smaller female whose dark curly hair was defying even the water to remain a spring halo around her head.

She was the first to pull herself from the water, her eyes bright and round, and focused on Harry. She took several forceful strides

forwards, hands on her hips and said in a voice that had even Tom's back straightening.

"Harry James Potter what on earth do you think you're doing!"

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovelies!

I hope you enjoyed the chapter. I'm happy it came together quicker than the last one!

Welp, for anyone who was wondering when (or if) the others tagged in this story would show up, here's your answer!

Been waiting for us to get to when they drop in for ages !

Get it?

Drop in!

So, I gotta think that if Tom knew the whole story he would still be angry, but probably less so than before and in a different way I mean a sane Tom anyway, and Harry is like 70% of his sanity at this point

Also....the timeline is just my own now cuz Tom snr should already be dead in canon at this point. (For like an entire year) So! We're just ignoring that because I didn't look it up before hand.

I don't think I have anything else to say for this chapter....let me know what you think! Thank you so much for reading and commenting you guys make my day and fuel the muses!! And I'll see you!!!

Next Time!

Harry's reunion with his friends

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Potter.

The name reverberated through Tom like a gong.

Potter. Potter. Potter.

He looked to Harry, who was skinny and had dark hair, and maybe he looked a bit like Charles who had graduated a few years past. Though he couldn't remember the Potters ever being so short.

Not that Tom had paid more than a passing interest in him. He had been Head Boy but not a prefect. He had done well in his classes but had not been particularly studious. He had been in Gryffindor like the rest of his family before him.

Which would make Harry the little black sheep of the family, if that were the case.

before he could dwell on it for too long though one of the twins broke away from the others.

"Now, now, Hermione, that's hardly the way to greet our good friend who has been missing for most of the year," he swaggered over and draped a lanky arm over her small shoulder.

The other Twin moved in a near mirror image of the other to stand on her other said, "exactly, we have more pressing questions."

"I suppose you're right-" The girl began but was summarily cut off.

"Yes," one said, "we are," said the other. They shared a grin over her head and the first one broke away once more. "First things first, dear Harrikins."

"What in the name of Merlin are you wearing?" the other twin moved forward and as one they draped themselves over Harry.

Before Tom's blood had a chance to boil, or his head a moment to stop spinning, Harry shook out of his own shock. "What...How are you even

here, and stop that!" He shook the twins off of him, and batted away hands that had been poking at and smoothing over the shoulders of his robes.

"That's sort of a long story, I guess," the last red head spoke up for the first time, a blush tinting his pale face as he smiled a bit shyly, "hey, mate."

Harry laughed, there was relief there, and joy as well. He took a few steps forward and the redheaded boy moved to meet him, accepting the hug as Harry threw his arms over him. "Hey, Ron. Missed you, man."

"Missed you too," Ron whispered back.

Tom did not seethe. This was a friendly reunion, if the familiarity and adoring looks were anything to go by. But he wanted some answers, sooner rather than later. And the pointed, piercing looks that the girl and twins were giving him when they weren't indulging in Harry and the boy's open affection, were not helping matters.

Tom crossed his arms over his chest, and waited.

When Harry broke away from Ron he turned to Hermione, a little bashfully, until the slope of her shoulder softened and she flew forwards into his arms.

"Oh, I'm so sorry for yelling, I was so worried," her words were mumbled into Harry's shoulders but were still loud enough to carry in the still morning air, "we didn't know what had happened."

"Yeah," said one of the twins, "everyone's been going mad trying to find you."

"Hey," the other twin cut in, "stop hogging him, come on!"

Harry happily accepted a hug from the both of them, at the same time, squished between them and smiling a bright smile that had only been reserved for Tom and Alphard before.

He was not jealous at this at all.

Harry laughed as they all pulled away, taking his time to actually look them over. He shook his head, "what am I wearing? What are you wearing? You look like you're starting a very depressing boy band." They were all wearing the same nondescript black robes. They were of

a slightly older fashion than what was commonly worn now, but of good quality wool, as far as Tom could tell.

The girl snorted a laugh but the other three, like Tom, seemed completely clueless, "a what?" Ron asked. One of the twins mouthed, 'boy band' at the other who just shrugged.

"Dumbledore told us we had to blend," the girl said, "and that we couldn't draw attention to ourselves so."

"Bland robes," the twins said.

"Dumbledore...?" Tom said softly, drawing every eye to him.

Harry was suddenly at his side, lower lip between his teeth as he looked between Tom and the others.

"These are...my friends, Tom...and," he looked back at the girl, "can we go somewhere, um...a little more private?"

"I'm dying to see how different the town is," one of the twins said. How did anyone tell them apart? They were already starting to give Tom a bit of a headache.

Harry took Tom's hand and led them all away from the fountain, still running smoothly after the incident.

Harry took them into the pub, it was mostly empty and dark, he asked for a moment from the others and pulled Tom over to a table in the corner.

"Ah...look...I," he started, unsure where exactly to start.

Tom tried to give him a reassuring smile, "so...these are your friends?"

"Yeah," Harry said with a nervous laugh, rubbing at the back of his neck, "I...need to speak with Ron and Hermione for a little bit alone. If you wouldn't mind keeping an eye on Fred and George for me...they can be a bit..."

Tom laughed softly, "I understand," they seemed far worse than ten Alphards. No wonder Harry was so good with him. "But, um...which is Fred and which is George?" He at least wanted to get names right.

For Harry's sake.

"You know," Harry said with a rueful smile and a shrug, "I think only

they know that."

Fair enough, he supposed. Harry stood up on the tips of his toes to place a quick kiss on Tom's lips. This did not, of course, go missed by any of his friends. The twins loudly whistled at them, and when Tom looked over Ron was beet red from embarrassment, and Hermione, from the looks of it, pale with anger.

Well...

He had wanted his birthday to be eventful...

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He should...probably have not kissed Tom.

Hermione's eyes were dark and she was openly glaring now.

And he definitely should have at least told them about he and Tom before kissing him. But it had become second nature. A knee jerk reaction. He was going to go away for a time without Tom, so, he gave him a kiss.

Harmless. Really.

He hadn't thrown Tom down on the table and climbed on top of him, or any other outlandish, vulgar displays.

It was a simple kiss. And he was not going to be ashamed of it.

"So..." he stared, unable to look Hermione full in the eyes under that gaze. He shot a quick look to Tom and the twins, the later of which were perched on either side of Tom, leaning into him. No doubt asking all sorts of inappropriate questions.

Especially now.

He really should have waited.

"So," Ron said simply. He was also avoiding Hermione's eye. He followed Harry's gaze to the other table, "do you think he'll be alright with them?"

"Oh yeah," Harry said brightly, "Tom's handled worse than them before."

"So," Ron said again, "about that."

"What are you thinking?" Hermione hissed, "what was that? What are you thinking?"

Harry met her eyes, worry over her temper melting into his own banked fury, "what was I thinking? I was thinking that I was never going to get back to my time, and so I wasn't going to spend my life here alone and unhappy. I was thinking that finally, finally I got the chance to live a life how I wanted it."

"You didn't try to come back?" Hermione's tone was equal parts shocked and appalled.

Harry threw up his hands, "there isn't a way back, or, there wasn't. Dumbledore couldn't help. I lost the locket that sent me back in the first place!"

"And what, your plan was to just leave us and think we wouldn't worry about you?"

"There really wasn't anyway around that. And, I might add, it wasn't exactly my choice."

"And what about You Know Who, what about the war?"

"What about it?" Harry asked, crossing his arms, "it isn't going anywhere."

Hermione paused, blinking at him. Ron, who had said nothing in all this, looked cautiously between the two. When it appeared that they weren't about to take a bite out of each other, he said, "your plan, then, was to wait it out...wait for the war to just happen?"

"Well," Harry started.

"And then go fight the war, as an old man?" Ron asked dryly,.

"Yes."

A beat of silence as they stared at one another, absorbing the information. Then, the tension cracked. Harry's ribs hurt from the force of his laughter, and seeing even Hermione wipe tears from her eyes made it that much harder to gain control of his breathing once

more.

"I was going to come say hello then, too."

Ron gasped harder, folding over to clutch his ribs, "J-just, show up on our doorstep, O-old man Potter!"

Harry took off his glasses to rub his eyes, taking deep breaths, "I never said it was a good plan. Just the only thing I could think of. But-" He cut himself off, sobered, and looked over at Tom. The three of them were now staring at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"But," Hermione prompted.

Harry bit his lip, "you won't like it."

She shook her head, running a hand through her frazzled hair, she sighed, "I was...too harsh...we were just worried, Harry. Dumbledore didn't know what had happened, or what to do. He spent most of the year working on a way to track to you, and get us here and back safely."

"Yeah...how did you guys do that anyway?"

Hermione dug in the pocket of her robe and came out with a little disk. It didn't look like anything he had ever seen before, just a small bit of copper with a hummingbird stamped on it. "He made these, they are attuned to the magical signature of a single person. The ones we used to find you and come here were only attuned to you...they were lost in the process. These," she hefted the little disk on her palm, "are attuned to Dumbledore...but only the one in our time."

"That's..."

"Yeah," Ron perked up, "we have an extra so you can come back with us!"

"Oh," Harry said.

"Oh?" Ron asked, exasperated, "what oh?"

"So...remember how I said my plan changed?" Harry smiled at them, trying to be cheery, even as he knew they were not going to like what he had a to say. "It's about Tom....and me."

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"What about Diagon Alley?" The one who said he was Fred asked.

"Yes," said George, "what is the flavor there? What are the children into in 1945?"

Tom had expected questions about himself, if for no other reason than he was obviously involved with Harry on a level that was more than friends. He had not expected for the twins to come at him, rapid fire, with questions about shops in town and the spending habits of his peers.

Or well, whom they thought were Tom's peers, anyhow.

Tom tried to keep his eyes off of Harry. There had been a rather explosive argument that seemed to be the bossy girl accusing Harry of something and Harry, to Tom's pride, had met her word for word....until it had devolved into chaotic laughter.

He tried, instead, to think of Diagon Alley, he said, "there are shops for everything that one could need...clothing, books, supplies for everything...food," he sighed, "once again it is hard for me to know what you might be looking for, specifically, if you do not tell me."

Fred tapped a finger against his lips and let out a very audible hum, but it was George who said ponderously, "we were warned against saying too much about the future, right Fred?"

"That's correct, George."

"I thought you were Fred?"

"Worry not, dear Tom," the one his left said, "if we were too, disregard the rules given to us."

"In a very long, very boring meeting," the one of his right chimed in.

"Then we would, perhaps," began the left, "inquire about the shops of leisure, as it were," added the right.

"Leisure? Like Quiddich?"

"Sure, sure," said the left hand twin, "Quiddich is great fun, we do Quiddich, don't we Forge?"

"Too right, Gred."

And Tom was really hoping a server showed up soon so he could order a drink. He wasn't really one to indulge, as Head Boy he needed to set an example. But no one from the castle was here and he might start hexing people, Harry's friends or no, if he didn't get some relief soon.

Luckily. Thankfully. And Gloriously, Harry and the others came over right about that time. Harry gave him a warm smile, before turning on one of the twins and forcing him to budge over so Harry could slide in next to Tom. Tom wrapped an arm around him, sighing deeply as tension drained from him on contact. The room warmed up, the candles didn't flash so harshly off the deep red the hair surrounding him.

"You two better have been nice," Harry said, eyeing them sternly.

The twin Harry had forced up was now sitting next to the other, the boy, Ron, who must have been a younger brother sat next to them, Hermione slid in last. She gave Tom a very searching look.

"We were angels," one of the twins said, both of them smiling bright and innocently to Harry.

Harry huffed a little laugh, leaning further into Tom. He looked up, and Tom could feel how anxious he was through their link, "I know this is..."

Tom shook his head, "it's alright, really."

Across from Harry, Hermione shifted in her seat, "Harry?"

"Right," he sat up a little further in his seat, "I said I'd tell you how I got here," he shot a quick glance at Tom, "it's something I wanted all of you to know...well...it started on my birthday."

Harry's story was one of wonder to Tom. Dumbledore was going to come get Harry from his relatives. Dumbledore! Because Harry's safety was in danger!? This was something he did not elaborate on, though the others looked pointed at him several times in the retelling for some reason.

As though Tom would ever do anything that jeopardized Harry's safety.

"I didn't realize anything was wrong at first...obviously the locket had

some sort of spell on it that read as magic being used in a clearly muggle location by a minor...but when no one knew me and I got suspicious...I gave them my mother's last name instead," Harry shrugged, "I thought, someone would see me and call me out on the lie, but they never did...then at the ministry I saw a paper with the date and...then Dumbledore came and he wasn't the same." Harry sighed again, "Dumbledore didn't know how to get me back, and I figured, if he couldn't figure it out...and I was just...so tired. With everything."

"Oh Harry!"

Before Tom could blink Hermione was up out of her seat and practically in Harry's lap, sobbing obviously from way her back shook, in between gasps she said, "with Sirius gone, and we were unable to write."

"Yeah, sorry about that, mate," Ron said lowly, "I completely forgot about the Order forcing us to stop...a few owls went missing and they got panicky. We couldn't send anything to you."

Harry patted Hermione with the patience of a saint, "it's fine...It's all fine now, really. But well..that's it. I was stuck here, so I was going to make the best of it."

"So that's why you're shacking up with this tall drink of water?" One of the twins said, and they both waggled their eyebrows at Tom.

It was at that moment that Ron happened to look down where Tom's hand rested on the table, he jumped as though shocked, "is that....that's a courting ring, oh Merlin!"

The twins sat forward as one, whistling in unison as they took in the ring on Tom's finger. Harry's hand went to the bracelet on his wrist to fiddle with it nervously.

"Harry," Hermione, who had pulled herself from Harry's person, straightening her robes as she went back to her seat, a little red in the face but otherwise unperturbed until she had looked between the ring and bracelet. "there's...we have to talk about something important."

Harry shook his head, "it really has to wait Hermione, I'm... I don't think I can handle anymore today."

"But it's about," she clearly cut her gaze to Tom this time, "and you did say you would explain everything, once you told us how you got

here."

"If there is anything that you would like to say to me," Tom began, and Hermione made as though she would say something, but Harry rose a hand to forestall anymore conversation.

"Enough," Harry said sharply, "for today. Please," he added softer.

"But the Anchors," Hermione began desperately.

"He never did say that they had a time limit," Ron said helpfully, the twins nodded.

Hermione huffed, "I don't think he envisioned that we would stick around and chat."

"He should have," Harry said, already standing up, "because I can't do much more today." He pulled on Tom's hand to get him to stand.

"What are we supposed to do?" Hermione asked, a little snappish.

That brought Harry up short, "you probably shouldn't come back with us...I mean, most everyone is gone, but it might cause trouble."

"We'll get a room!" One of the twins yelled.

"Capital idea! We can book one here," the other one said, "we can meet up with Harry for dinner, yes?"

"Um..." Harry said, "I'll, let you know when..."

"We understand," the twins slid out of the booth after Tom, Ron scooting around the long way after them, leaving Hermione gaping at them all.

"Yeah," Ron said, "this is a bit crazy for all of us. I think we're good to wait. Like you said," he added with a smirk, "the future isn't going anywhere.

"Thanks," Harry said a little breathlessly, hugging Ron and the others, even a very stiff Hermione, before pulling Tom out after him into the early afternoon.

"I'm not certain it's safe to leave them there," Tom said conversationally as he wrapped a protective arm around Harry's tense shoulders. He was thinking more of the twins and their antics, and how they clearly were enjoying their time in the past.

But then Harry said, "that's hardly our problem," and snuggled closer to Tom as they walked back to the castle.

The disaster of the morning had been pushed from his mind, until they were returning over the snow dusted hills to the castle. He tightened his grip on Harry's shoulders, trying to force that misadventure from his mind.

Harry was silent and withdrawn all the way to the dungeons. He hung up his cloak and changed into his slippers in sort of trance and made his way to Tom's room without pause. Once there, with the door closed, he paced.

"Harry," Tom started, though he wasn't completely sure what he should say. He made his way to the bed, sat down and tried to come off as relaxed, "your friends seem nice."

Harry laughed, somewhere between bitter and hysterical, "my friends...Tom, I'm"

"I know," Tom said.

"You know?" Harry stopped his pacing to give Tom a very confused look.

"I know that you...are from the future," Tom shrugged, "I figured it out a while ago."

Harry's shoulder's slumped, "Wha..."

"In the maze," Tom said lowly, "if figured that you did not remember...you were fighting, and well, you were beyond being able to tell friend from foe, and attacked me. The shield I threw up sort of connected."

"Prio*ri* Encantatum...." Harry collapsed onto the bed, shell shocked.

Tom blinked at him, "so you knew...that that would happen?"

Harry had gone pale, his hands closed into fists on his knees. Tom reached over and took one of his hands, surprised and worried with how cold it had been. He moved closer to Harry, wrapping his arms around him. There was a question he had to ask. A few puzzling happenings that were falling into place.

It was a question he wasn't sure he wanted to ask. An answer he didn't

think he wanted to have. But he asked all the same.

"Does this have something to do with what your friend wanted to talk to you about?" She had been cutting glares at Tom almost as soon as she had stepped out of the portal. All of them had, at one point or another. Harry knew about Priori Encantantum....which meant he probably knew their wands were linked.

Then there was their own, unique bond.

There was a picture forming. He might not be ready for the answers, but he needed them.

Harry looked at him, really looked at him, for the first time since the arrival of his friends. His eyes were dark, they looked tired. Haunted. "Yes," he said.

"And your friend...Hermione? What she wanted to talk to you specifically, was about...me?"

"I think so," Harry sighed.

"You can tell me...you know you can. Anything at all, Harry. But especially if it involves me."

"I don't know...there's too much," Harry sighed, "I didn't think it would be a good idea to tell you...but," Harry bit his lip and look up at Tom. He didn't say it, Tom could almost feel it. The but...he wasn't going to tell Tom about how he might have played some role in Harry's life in the future...but. But he had caught Tom in the act of trying to kill his relatives.

"I want you to tell me, Harry...you....you're the most important thing in my life. I need to know."

Harry nodded, his brows furrowed in thought, "I don't want you to hear anything from them...They would say something...I just don't want you to hear it that way, but, I don't know if I could just say it. Do you think. Like how we do in the dreams, do you think I could show you?"

"That's an interesting thought," Tom mused with a tilt of his head.

"Unless you have a pensieve," Harry added with a little smirk, "I think we'd be here for the rest of the week if had to try to say it."

"It's only Sunday."

"There's a lot to tell," Harry quipped back. It would have playful, their usual banter before Tom would pounce on him, wrap Harry in his arms and kiss him. Except Tom knew that what lay on the other side this time would not be as pleasant.

"I think we could make it work like one...if you kept in mind the actual memory and didn't let your mind wander."

Harry nodded, "I think I could do that," he said, voice low in thought, "if I can get to sleep..."

Tom smiled, "that I can help with." He rose fluidly from the bed and went to one of his shelves. He made it a point to have treatments to common ailments in his possession. In case someone was in dire need of something and did not feel like going to the Hospital Wing for help. Some of them he had even brewed himself, including his sleeping draught.

He came back to the bed with a tall bottle of blue potion and a small glass, "now you must take the full dose, go to sleep and then call me in morning to make sure you are well," he said in a lofty tone as he poured a measure into the glass and handed it to Harry, "understood?"

"Yes, doctor," Harry said with a playful grin, and Tom had time to take in the use of the muggle word before he downed the glass, his grin becoming scrunched in displeasure at the taste.

Tom tended to brew his potions strong.

Taking the cup he motioned for Harry to scoot up to the top of the bed and lay down, he moved around to the side where he slept, pouring his own sleeping potion, a little less than Harry's since he could get himself to sleep on his own, he simply wanted to speed things along. Corking the bottle he lay down next to Harry who was already yawning.

"Go to sleep, Harry," Tom said softly, taking Harry into his arms as his own body grew heavy with the potion, "I'll find you and then we can figure the rest out."

Harry's eyes were closed and his breaths evened out before Tom had finished speaking, and he followed Harry into slumber almost instantly.

He was in void-space. The black nothingness that he hadn't needed to fall into in some time. Reflexively, he must ended up there from potion induced sleep. It was easy to find Harry, though, just follow the warm pulses of golden light though the endless abyss. The closer he moved, a weightless sort of flying, formless and instinctual, the more Tom became...well, Tom. He could smell the fresh air scent of a spring meadow, feel the golden sun on his chilled skin. And so, it was quite a shock when Tom stepped out onto the beach.

It was just as cold and mist soaked as it had been when Tom first encountered Harry's frantic nightmare. The sky was blotted out behind heavy banks of clouds, the steel grey waves white tipped and thrashing as they lapped at Tom's bare feet, frigid and stinging as he made his way over to the huddled form on the shore that he knew all too well.

A wisp of black caught at the edge of his eye and Tom became aware that he was wearing what he had been the first time he'd been there. The tattered and worn robe of a wraith.

It was natural, another reflex, he wanted to change it. To be wearing the robes he had picked out for himself. Something that was both practical and well made. But he held back.

Harry was crouched, if Tom had to guess, close to where he had been that first time as well, only now he was not digging in the wet sand with his hands. He sat huddled into himself in the oddest set of muggle clothing Tom had ever seen. His trousers were of a rough material in a patchily faded dark blue and the jumper he wore had clearly been made for someone much, much larger. On his feet, instead of the nice leather boots he owned, were some off white, nearly grey, canvas shoes.

Tom gestured to himself when Harry looked up, "why am I always wearing this in your dreams?" Harry sighed and Tom rose an eyebrow, "and, not to sound like your charming friends, but, what ever are you wearing?"

Harry laughed then, rising to his feet, "muggle clothes?" He said a little shyly.

"And that's what muggle kids wear in your time?"

Harry laughed harder, doubling over for breath, "you sound like an old person," when he finally pulled himself up, wiping a tear from his eye, he said with a little shrug, "it's what I wore. I...didn't have a lot of

a choice."

Tom nodded, he had often not had a choice in his past as well, "and my attire?"

Harry looked him over, brow furrowed and lips pursed, "I don't know...I didn't do it on purpose."

Tom nodded, he looked around the beach, "why here? You dreamed of this place before."

Harry looked around as well, "I think this is supposed to be the beach I was on just before I got sucked through time. It didn't really look like this, though. It was in the summer and it was a nice day, and there were a lot of muggle families around. It was nice, and this is..."

Bleak.

"Your subconscious seems to be very dramatic. Let us hope it doesn't try to trickle in on your memories," Tom tapped a finger against his lips, just in case Harry couldn't control what he was thinking of, they should try for something harmless first.

"Alright," Tom said, "why don't we try something easy, something that you can be sure is correct before we move on."

"Something fun?" Harry said with a smirk. It was amazing how light Harry felt, that Tom felt through him. This was going to be a devastating ordeal, if Harry's initial nerves were anything to go by, but here he was, putting on a smile and being brave...

For Tom.

Tom stepped forward and took Harry in his arms, trying to lend him some form of strength, "something fun," he agreed.

The beach halted around them, the air simply gone, the waves frozen in a choppy tableau. Then everything shifted and faded. Suddenly they were back at Hogwarts, a group of children in robes that were different from the ones that Tom was used to, but were clearly still school robes, Slytherin and Gryffindor both, were congregating on the Quiddich pitch. They were very small children too. First years, and judging by the array of brooms clutched in too small hands they were having their first flying lesson.

Only the teacher wasn't around.

There was a blond haired, blue eyed boy, that had Abraxas' pointy features and could only have come from him, he was holding a glass orb in one hand, a broom in the other, and saying something scathing to...

The boy was smaller than the rest, he had messy black hair and glasses that were nearly too large for his face, and the scar that Tom had come to know so well on his forehead.

Tom walked forward before even knew what he was doing, he stood before the boy, who, obviously couldn't see him. The very small Harry glared at the boy who was a Malfoy, yelling at him to give the orb back. Then Malfoy was off on his broom and a little, very determined Harry racing right after him.

Tom followed their progress, breath held when Malfoy threw the orb and Harry narrowly missed colliding with the castle as he caught it straight from the air, as though it were nothing.

In his mind a sleepy Harry was pressed against his chested, mumbling drowsily.

"Best seeker in your year..." Tom said, more than a little shocked. He jerked when a hand took his own, but it was only Harry. His Harry. Smiling at him.

"My first time ever flying," his smile was so bright it put the remembered sun to shame.

"Did it...happen like this?"

Harry nodded, "I think...I can do the rest. It wasn't hard bringing the memory up. I could change it, I think, but it just sorta played out when I thought about it."

Around them the castle grounds had fallen silent, the color muted, the children still as they had been. With the Gyffindor's racing to Harry and the Slytherins looking a bit crest fallen.

Tom blinked, "you were a Gryffindor?" He said stupidly. He could see it right there, it's just....

Harry laughed, "the Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin, but I asked it not to."

"You asked it...Harry," Tom rubbed his temple soothingly, though a

smile still tugged at his lips, "Harry that is the most Slythrin thing I've heard in my life. You told the Hat where you wanted to go."

Harry shrugged, "Malfoy, er, Draco...Abraxas' grandson, and twice the git, was the first wizard raised kid I'd ever met and he was..."

"I can imagine," Tom grinned, "I often want to be elsewhere when a Malfoy is around."

When their laughter died, so did a little of the joy in Harry's eyes. "I suppose we should start."

Tom nodded, wrapping his arms around Harry once more as the landscape began to change. The physical contact not exactly needed, but it was grounding. At least for Tom.

The blackness around them never coalesced into something else. It wasn't the endlessness of the void. It was simply...dark.

"Harry-" he began, but Harry beat him to it.

"I thought...I thought we should start at the beginning," Harry voice was small, and when it ended the laughter began.

It was cold, high pitched. It didn't even sound human.

But the screaming of a terrified woman was worse.

Then all around them a bright green light flashed, followed by a rushing pressure in his ears and something that Tom could only describe as being within the eye of an explosion.

Then it was gone.

They were back on the beach, though this time it was sunny and the waves were a calm and easy blue.

Harry chewed on his lip as he gathered his thoughts, Tom could just feel the edge of his whirling emotions through their link, and Tom.

Tom tried not to shake.

"So," Harry said when he finally said anything, "I had this dream a lot. My aunt always told me that my parents died in a car crash and that this dream was just what I remember of it...I was a little over a year old when it happened...But when I was eleven, on my eleventh birthday, a large man came to deliver my letter to Hogwarts and told

me I was wizard," he said it all in a rush, then drew a deep breath to continue.

"His name was Hagrid," Tom must have made some sort of face at that, a tribute to his startled nerves, because Harry gave a bitter laugh and said, "Yes, that Hagrid. Well," he continued, "turns out my aunt and uncle knew my parents were magic and I would a wizard and they tried to keep me from getting the letter but that backfired...that was the night I learned that they hadn't died in a car crash...they had been murdered. They had angered a dark wizard and he had gone after them...after me, specifically. My parents were betrayed by a friend and he came one night and killed them. Tried to kill me, but it backfired."

"Backfired?" Tom said, it came out whisper thin through his dry throat.

Harry nodded, and the playful smirk was back, "you are looking at the only person to survive the killing curse. Just so you know...made me famous. Well that and that the rebounded spell was thought to have killed the dark lord. The Boy Who Lived, that's what they call me..."

And why Harry had been surprised no one knew who he was, why his friends just understood and accepted that fact. He had become a hero as a child. Raised my lying muggles, Tom ground his teeth and tried to focus. "And that was what you remember, the killing curse, the laughter, the screaming,"

"My mother," Harry said softly, looking out to the water, "and the green light of the killing curse."

"This dark lord," Tom said, "what was his name?"

He knew, with a terrible, horrendous certainty. He had never told Harry the name. He didn't allow anyone who followed him to even say it. Yet they knew. They were aware who their master had become. The role Tom had crafted for himself, the path they would all follow him on. One day Tom had planned to step out of the shadows and proclaim himself.

"He goes by, Lord Voldemort," Harry said softly.

Tom couldn't look away from his sad green eyes, he couldn't stop hearing that name...his name, on Harry's tongue. He didn't want to believe it. But he could feel it, the truth of it.

Suddenly it was hard to breathe.

"We don't have to continue."

Tom laughed bitterly. He was the monster here, and Harry was trying to take Tom's feeling into consideration. He was too good...too good for Tom. Too good to have his parent's taken from him.

"Why? Why would I..he.." It was dry and hollow, and it was all that Tom was able to ask.

Harry bit his lip and stalled for a time, it felt less like the whirlwind of his trying to sort his thoughts, and more like he was trying to protect Tom...or himself.

"There was this prophecy...it was made to Dumbledore, and one of your Dearth Eat-...er...your followers heard. But he didn't hear it all evidently. Just that someone was going to be born that had the power to defeat you...there were two of us that it could be, but you decided it was me, and so..." He held his arms out at his side as though that explained everything perfectly.

a half heard prophecy that he had only heard second hand, and he decided to go off and kill a child for it? Tom was willing to do a lot to build the world he wanted. The vision of the future that Salazar Slytherin had dreamed of, had written endlessly of in his journals and hidden safely in the Chamber for an heir that accomplish them.

Tom was going to be that heir. He had frameworks in place, he was known, he was respected, and he was feared to a certain extent. The plan was not to rule aimlessly, but to change the wizarding world for the better. Get them more power and freedom. Take them out of the shadows. If it meant that muggles had to be pushed aside, if it meant a war had to break out, well then, Tom would do what it took to get there.

He couldn't imagine this fitting in with that plan.

"We can stop," Harry said again, when Tom shook his head he nodded and took a deep breath. "Er, well...so I had my first run in with Voldemort my first year...or well, second run in, you know, but I don't remember that one very well. Well, you've seen." He cut off his rambling by clearing his throat, and tugging a little frantically at his hair, "Dumbledore got a hold of the Philosopher's Stone, he had it at Hogwarts to keep it safe, but one of the teachers was sort of...possessed by Voldemort's...um...wraith, I guess."

The beach faded into a stone, windowless chamber, fire took up what looked like the only exit and there was a large, ornate mirror in the middle. Two figures stood in the room. The very small, and clearly frightened Harry, and a tall man in dark robes.

Tom thought they were both staring into the mirror, until he realized that the little Harry was in fact looking up into the back of the man's head, where, upon closer inspection, a horrid, twisted face looked back.

It didn't look like Tom. It didn't even look like his father, which he had come to accept would be his future some time ago. His handsome features had always done him enough good that he couldn't be completely angered that they had come from a muggle.

But this.

The eyes were merely slits, the pupils red and black and dreadful. Two small holes for nostrils and a slash of a mouth. It was something from a literal nightmare, made worse because...it was him.

In a haze he watched as the distorted face from the back of the man's head ordered the man to kill Harry. But upon touching him he shrieked, backing away with his hands badly burnt and smoldering.

The small Harry grabbed at him, determined to cause as much pain as he could, they both fell to the floor screaming, and the whole scene halted before turning back once more to the beach. It was quicker this time, either because Harry was getting better at shifting the scenes, or because he was in a hurry to get away from the memory.

"Quirrel died, but the wraith thing didn't."

The wraith thing. If they weren't in a dream Tom might have actually vomited. He took a deep breath. "You were a child."

"Yeah well," he shrugged, "that never seemed to matter to anyone."

Before Tom could point out that it should have mattered to at least someone, his relatives, his friends, the adults in his life that were supposed to look after him, the beach began to shift and fade once more, this time into a chamber he knew all too well.

Harry hadn't grown much between this child and the last, if he were being generous he would say that maybe there was an inch difference in height, but he was just as scrawny and just as worn looking. It was

the other figure, however, that gave him pause. Chilled him to the bone. Because, it was Tom. A little younger, with his Prefect badge and a cruel smile that he had only ever directed at those who had wronged him repeated, it was the cold grin of satisfaction soon to be wrought.

It was a look that should have never been directed at Harry.

It was harder to watch the horror unfold this time. To see him, as Tom, ruthless and bloodthirsty, and have it all turned to Harry and the small, pale girl on the chamber floor. Related to the twins and the boy, Ron, if her hair was anything to go by.

This Tom, though spectral at first, was gaining substance. It wasn't until Tom spotted the book...his old journal that he understood why.

This was the bit of his soul he had carved from his chest and placed into a book. This was his Horcrux. Some distant part of him wanted to be smug at the fact that it had worked. Here he was, alive again, or there about, when all he had been before was a wraith in the back of a fool's head.

But the Horcrux was toying with the little Harry, he called the basilisk to distract and kill him. He was killing a young girl to gain his life. This was the part of Tom that had accepted responsibility for Myrtle's death and saw only opportunity in it. A part who only thought of gain and not the whole picture.

He couldn't even remember being that person.

The basilisk had been over a thousand years old, it was a shame to see it perish. Or it would have been. Had the outcome not have been Harry or the snake and Tom was more than happy that Harry had walked away.

The basilisk fang through his journal jolted him, though only in a distant, vague way. It was good that it was gone now...A sliver of soul that knew only pain and destruction had no place being a corporeal being all its own.

The Horcrux vanished and Harry was saved by a phoenix. A phoenix he knew.

"Fawks?" Tom said in numbed disbelief. Dumbledore's pet saved Harry.

He needed to find a nice lizard for it to eat when they woke up.

"Yeah," Harry said a little bashfully as the chamber turned to beach once more. "he saved me...you know the cores of our wands came from him."

"No," Tom said slowly, "I didn't know that," Tom needed to find him two lizards now. He shook his head at Harry, still having trouble processing everything he had seen, "you pulled the sword of Gryffindor from the Hat?"

"Yeah...Dumbledore said only a true Gryffindor could...but I think if you're desperate enough the Hat wouldn't just hold out on you, you know?"

Tom laughed despite himself. "When was that?"

"Second year," Harry said lowly, "it was pretty awful for me. Lucius Malfoy, er, Abraxas' son, put that journal in with Ginny's, she's Ron's little sister, well he put that in with her school things when we were out shopping, and whatever enchantment was on it possessed her. She opened the chamber and people got petrified and well..." Harry shrugged, "it was just an awful year, everyone thought I was the heir when it came out that I could talk to snakes...Then Hermione got attacked."

"Your friend?"

Harry nodded and then shrugged, "she's a muggleborn. That's all the basilisk seemed to care about."

Tom nodded, suddenly very tired. He sat down on the sandy shore and watched the waves, when Harry got down to lean against him he said, "she had been raised to target muggleborns. Salazar had wanted to keep the magical knowledge within the magical community only....he feared muggles and what they could do with great enough numbers. The Basilisk wanted only to help him in this quest."

"I think that's pretty stupid," Harry said promptly, "Ron said that wizards would have died out long ago if they hadn't started marrying muggles and muggleborns. And Hermione is the best witch in our whole year. She's so smart the ministry gave her a timeturner so that she could take as many classes as she wanted our third. I mean, it was a pretty bad idea, but you get my point."

Tom snorted at that, it did sound terribly reckless. "And what horrors

befell you in your third year?"

"Well, quite a lot actually," Harry laughed. Laughed! At the fact that he had been tormented at thirteen. "But not by you...not really. My godfather broke out of Azkaban, he shouldn't have been there at all. But everyone thought he was some crazed murderer, so they set dementors out to find him. And they really, really like me for some reason. So I started getting chased by packs of them whenever they were around. I learned to make a patronus, and met my godfather, and the person who actually set my parents up for murder. We were able to help him get to freedom along with a convicted hippogriff...and well...all things considered it was a pretty good year."

"Wait, wait...that's...a convicted hippogriff?" Tom pressed his palms into his eyes. What the utter hell was the future?

"He bit Abraxas' grandson, and Draco and his parents threw a hissy fit over it."

Tom gave a laugh at that, which he hoped wasn't hysterical. But he sobered quickly, "your godfather?" Harry had said he had died recently...and at the mention of him Harry seemed to deflate.

"Yeah...his name was Sirius Black, he was..." Harry smirked, "he was a lot like Alphard, in looks. Though a little less rambunctious. Even though he could turn into a large black dog animagus."

"I'm sorry. That you lost him."

Harry leaned against him, "it's okay...there's not a lot left to show. Do you want to continue?"

He didn't, really. But there was a part he was missing. Hermione had been anxious, there was threat after Harry. But from what Tom had seen his future self, repulsive as it was, couldn't have really cause much harm. Or at least, not anything too dire. Not alone and weak as he was.

Tom opened his mouth several times before he was able to find the right words, "It...or I...come back. Don't I? That's why your friends want you back."

"Not you," Harry began in a small voice, "Volde-"

"I'm Voldemort, Harry," Tom cut him off, "I am Voldemort already. Don't you see?" He asked with a bitter laugh. "I already made the

Horcrux that nearly killed your friend. I was responsible for Myrtle's death," he hung his head in defeat or shame... he couldn't tell which.

Harry shook his head vehemently, "it wasn't you. Not how you are now...it was you, but."

"Myrtle was an accident...the basilisk was ment to scare muggleborns away. No one was supposed to die."

Harry nodded, "the ugh...Tom from the book said as much."

"A Horcrux, Harry," Tom corrected, "a part of my soul that I tore apart so that, even if my body were to die, a part of me would live on."

"That's..." Harry began, but couldn't seem to come up with what it was exactly. Tom helped.

"Horrible? Wretched? Depraved?" He threw out rapid fire, "It is a terrible bit of dark magic that shouldn't be done lightly. One must become a murderer to do. I waited over an enitre year after Myrtle's death before working up the courage to do it..."

"How many times have you done it?" Harry asked in a small voice.

"Just once," Tom said dully, "though I had planned to do it again."

Understanding flashed in Harry's eyes, sad and tired now, "I wonder how many times you did it before, er, well, how many times you have done it after the first?" He huffed softly, "talking about the past and future as one is really confusing."

Tom gave a small smile, "yes, it is."

"Was it another Horcrux, another enchanted item, that brought me..it, back?"

Harry shook his head, "It was the wraith again...I guess it's the bit of you that was unable to die when your curse," Harry shook his head, "when his curse hit me. I won't think of him as you, Tom. You wouldn't do that to me."

He had not posed it aa a question, yet there is a kernel of uncertainty in his voice. Tom pulled him close and looked him dead in the eyes, "Never," he tried to put as much certainty and truth in that one single word as he could. Harry had to know he would never.

Harry nodded, "I think I'd like to just show you then." Tom nodded,

and the beach warped into darkness.

At first he thought it was another scenario like the first, then his eyes adjusted to the gloom. It was a deeply dark night, clouds obscured any hint of star or moon, and the scent of fresh tilled, wet earth hit his nose. They were in a graveyard standing before a headstone that was much larger than the rest, the name and dates upon which were eerily familiar.

As was the silhouette of the manor house on the the hill.

"Is this part of the trial?"

Tom whipped around, noticing the two boys for the first time. One was tall and broad, most likely Tom's age, it was hard to make out more of his appearance in the dark, other than that he was dirty and obviously tired as though he had ran a long way, but Tom thought he caught a hint of Hufflepuff yellow on his robes.

The other boy, to no surprise, was Harry. Older than the last vision, probably close to his age now, he was just as dirty, and to Tom's horror, bloody, as the other boy. Harry appeared to be leaning on him in favor of one leg.

A high pitched voice filled the air and with a flash of green light the scene burst into motion. The Hufflepuff boy was dead, and Harry was being tied to Tom's father's headstone, his wand having fallen near his dead companion.

If Tom had ever had nightmares, what followed would surely have been in them. The small man, still much bigger than Harry, preformed some ritual Tom had never heard of before, dropping a bundle of what must have been Tom's future wraith into a cauldron with Harry's blood, bones from his father's grave, and the small man's entire right hand.

What emerged from the cauldron was even worse. Tall, skeletal, and pale as death, the creature, fore it was not a man, had the a face very similar to that which had stretched the back of Quirrel's head. It was clothed by the small man and handed a wand. It payed no attention to the frightened and exhausted Harry, instead it reached down and lifted the small man's sleeve, the creature had called him Wormtail, but that surely couldn't be his named. Upon his arm was some sort of brand or tattoo that the creature placed one long finger against. Wormtail howled in pain at the touch, and then, one by one, the dark night filled with others. Black cloaked figures all wearing pale masks.

Tom was hanging on my a thread. It had been thin and weak from the start, and upon seeing Harry handled so, it had begun to fray. The creature was going to kill him, that was painfully clear. The group of cloaked figures he called had an agitated, bloodthirsty air about them that his put together and well bred Knights did not.

It seemed that as Tom grew and, piece by piece he was stripped apart and remade, the Knights had twisted and devolved with him.

He wanted to call it all off. Yell that it was enough. It had been enough the moment the creature had risen from the cauldron. It had been enough the second Harry told him the truth of the his past. Tom's future. But he couldn't. Couldn't form the words on hhis parched tongue, couldn't push them out of his too tight throat.

Harry fought the creature, with the pitiful amount of defense spells that he knew. He was saved because their wands linked, like his and Tom's had before. As shadows of what Tom could only assume were this creature's last victims fell from the glimmering link, there was a pressure on his hand.

Harry was there, he had been close the whole time, Tom knew. He had simply grown too numb to feel him there. Until he was touching Tom once more.

The graveyard shifted and Harry squeezed his hand.

Tom opened his eyes to muted late after light in his underwater room.

Chapter End Notes

Hello dears!

This chapter was not super fun to write XD. I hated it for Tom, but there, you have it.

I didn't want to go through the process of explaining EVERYTHING, because one, I assume you are here before you've read the books or at least watched the movies, so we already know what's going on. I dislike having recaps and the like.... Also, if I wrote it all out they chapter would still not be ready...it was so long already!

I am super looking forward to next chapter though! I think it'll be at least one more chapter before we deal with the others though, they can have a nice even in Hogmead while our boys sort themselves out!

Glad everyone was suitably surprised by the appearance of the rest of the gang (and I couldn't leave the twins out!)

We'll get Harry's POV in the next chapter, go into what he was thinking during their little meeting more, and...earn our rating!

Thank you guys so much for reading, and I hope that you liked this chapter. Your support keeps me going!!! And I can't wait to see you guys...

Next Time!

Tom has a really big choice to make

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Hello lovelies!!

I cannot stress enough how sorry I am that this took exactly two hundred and fifty years. I'm terribly sorry. My reluctance to write smut due to ace brain freeze (or as I like to call it 'what the hell is 'sexy' anyways, or, 'I can't believe it's not sexy')

Warred with getting some very bad news about the health of a family member and having to make a very sudden trip back to my home state.

Things aren't better in this regard...they won't be getting better either, so there may come a time when I lag again to deal with family stuff.

But, at least I finally finished what I always knew was going to be the hardest chapter to write. So Yay!! And now I'm having some technical troubles, so I'm sorry if the editing seems rushed.

Anywho, I hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tom was already out of bed by the time Harry managed to open his eyes and keep them open. The room had fallen into darkness, leaving Tom to pace in nothing but the dim embers of the hearth.

Harry sat up, folding his legs to his chest and hugging them close. With the fire so far down and the bed so empty he was already becoming chilled.

Or perhaps it had something to do with what they just seen.

It had been easy to open his mind to the memories, to let them flow as her remembered them. If he did nothing but stand back and let it play out, just observe and not try to be a part of it all, then it all happened as it had before.

It was Tom's response that had been a bit of a shock, though, perhaps it shouldn't have been...Harry had honestly expected anger. Not directed at him but simply in being shown the monster that Tom had somehow grown into. Confusion was also warranted. Sure. It was easy to see the twisted man that Voldemort was, how he relished his power

and the fear he held over others, and think that it had been his plan all along to fall down a dark and destructive path.

Clearly Tom knew the path he had been traveling down was dark. How could he not? It must have been quite a shock to realize, though, that such a path could be just as destructive to himself as it was to those he wished to control.

Every time Tom passed before the banked fire of the hearth the embers flared, throwing the room into a slightly brighter shade of gold before snuffing back down to glimmers.

He probably didn't even know he was doing it.

"Tom?" He called out when it seemed that Tom was too lost in his own thought to see that Harry was awake.

Tom jerked as though stung, but quickly recovered and before Harry could even blink he was there, leaning onto the bed, hands hovering over Harry as though afraid to touch him before settling on cupping his face.

"Harry, I..." he began, but could not seem to find the words to keep going.

"It's okay," Harry said with a little smile, "I'm okay."

"It is not okay!" Tom recoiled, though he did not leave the bed or release his gentle hold on Harry, "it's anything but...I..."

Harry was already shaking his head, "I told you...you're not...him."

"That...thing," Tom said after a brief pause, he did not exactly hunch in on himself, though he had always held himself so tall and put together that the slight slouch of his shoulders and tipping of his head seemed so pronounced. "I want to say that I cannot understand how I...became that...that thing. What was it that you asked? How many horcruxes I had made?" Tom took a deep breath, when he looked back at Harry there was so much sorrow in his dark eyes that Harry's breath caught in his chest.

"How much of your soul can you rip out before you stop being human?"

Harry swallowed dryly, his voice was shallow and hoarse, he said, "but you didn't. You're still you, not him."

"Yes," Tom said, softly, but desperation rang in his tone, "I just have to make sure that it stays that way."

That seemed like such an obvious statement that Harry simply shrugged. Of course Tom wouldn't become that. He had already changed so much, and now that he'd seen how much of a monster Voldemort was there shouldn't be any reason for him to continue down that path.

Tom, evidently, did not think it would be so simple.

He was pensive for several more minutes, his grip on Harry not letting up though his dark eyes were unfocused and far away.

"I know what to do," Tom said after several silent minutes. He rose from the bed, pulling Harry up behind him. They stopped only long enough to put on shoes and grab their cloaks before Tom was leading them out of the common room door and down the cold dark hall to the main stairs.

"I didn't realize we had slept so long," Harry said as they passed window after darkened window in their mad dash through the deserted castle. Tom didn't look back from wherever it was that he was taking Harry, though he answered all the same.

"You were asleep for a time, the potion, no doubt, kept you from waking."

Well, there wasn't much he could do about that. He would just have to wait until tomorrow to speak with Hermione and Ron again. "I hope they'll be alright," he said softly, then Tom turned a corner and Harry knew exactly where they were.

Second floor, headed towards a corridor that Harry was, perhaps, far too familiar with.

"Tom?" Harry began, steps slowing as they got to the bathroom door.

"It's alright, I promise," his grip tightened on Harry's hand as he opened the door and led them in.

Harry looked around, trying to spot, and hopelessly avoid, Myrtle. But she did not seem to be in residence at the moment. All the stalls were closed, but Tom did something, waving his wand almost carelessly, and proclaimed that they were alone.

He stopped before the tap, the one with the little carved snake on the side and looked to Harry for the first time since they left the room. He looked as though he might say something, but in the end he simply turned to the sink and whispered, "open," in a soft hiss.

The sink sprang back, just as Harry knew it would. And Tom took his hand once more to pull Harry into the hole, once they were through he turned back and closed the door with another quick command.

The tunnel leading to the chamber was in a lot better repair now than it had been when Harry was twelve. The path is smooth and free of slime, there were no discarded skeletal bodies of the basilisk's meals lining the way, and though the way was still steep, they managed to get down to the bottom of the tunnel with nothing more than carefully placed steps and a hand braced on the cold stone wall.

The way was dark, but Tom went forward with no hesitation, and Harry had no choice but to cling to his arm and follow along. Eventually the way leveled out and Harry was on flat earth once more. Tom paused for a moment, there was a groaning, scratching sound from up head and suddenly they were walking into a space that was just as dark, though the air was free flowing and if anything, cooler than before.

Tom snapped his fingers and a multitude of a candles sprung to life. There had to be at least a hundred of them. They were scattered all over the floor. Single tapers, branches of brass and silver candelabras, all flickered and glowed against the silent, cool breeze of the chamber.

Tom rushed ahead to an alcove Harry hadn't noticed the first time he had been there...he had been a little too preoccupied for too much sightseeing, but now he inched forward to get a better look at why they had to come there, tiptoeing around the boarder of the candles so as not to disturb any of them. The alcove housed a bookcase carved into the slick grey stone upon which sat many a fat leather bound book. They must have been enchanted to withstand the moisture, as the one that Tom plucked up opened like it was new. And dry.

Tom leafed through the book frantically, "this was Salazar Slytherins personal library," he said, shutting the book and replacing it on the shelve to grab up another, "or well, some of it. The stuff he didn't want anyone else to see, at least."

"What are all these?" Harry ran a finger down the spines of several books, though none held any sort of identifying mark. No author

name, no title, no number to show which might come first.

Tom put the book back, and sighing, reached for another, "journals, for the most part. Though some are spell books or instruction manuals for rituals. All written by him...all written in Parseltongue so that only his heirs could read them." Tom didn't pick another book at once, he stood staring at the shelf as though it were purposefully hiding the right book from him. Then he gave himself a shake, then laughed hollowly.

"I thought that when I found it, when I read what he had written, what he wanted, what his plans for the future had been, I thought I could do it and somehow..." he exhaled slowly, "somehow he would be proud...of me." The last was said in little more than a whisper, as though he were afraid to actually say it aloud.

Harry had the feeling he was a bit ashamed, maybe embarrassed to have ever thought such a thing. But he understood. He had hoped that his actions in the past had made his parents proud. Once Sirius was gone, he was only a little surprised to realize, Harry had wanted to keep making him proud too.

"And there is a ritual or spell here you think will help, er, future you?" Harry itched to take one of the books down himself, see Parseltongue written out, but.

But these books were bound to be full of dark magic. The sort of thing that could really twist someone. The sort of spells and rituals that Tom had probably enjoyed, but Harry wasn't sure he could bring himself to look at.

Tom ran his eyes over the near uniform covers, they were all shades of green or grey and other than slight size variations between them, there was nothing to make any of them stand out. He took hold of a short, fat book on a lower shelf and flipped it open halfway, "a ritual, yes!" he stood up quickly and lowered the book for Harry to see.

Harry squinted down at the page at first, as though it wouldn't count as him looking if he didn't do it full on, then blink and opened his eyes when nothing happened. And when he realized that the writing on the page was definitely not English.

How odd, that he should hear Parseltongue as English and not realize a difference, but here were words written out soft, looping furls that was completely foreign, and yet.

"I can read this?" Well it wasn't exactly reading so much as Harry looked at the words and knew what they were instantly...which was kinda like reading, once he got to thinking about it. He had just assumed there would be some lag between his eyes seeing the words and his brain understanding them, and yet...

He turned away from the page to stare at Tom instead of heading back down that loop once more. "What is it?"

Tom pressed his lips into a thin line, brows furrowed, he said, "there was quite a few...unsavory rituals in here. Things that Slytherin had wanted to implement on people to keep them in line. Loyal to only himself or his heirs. I suppose he thought he would have many of them...instead of just one."

"It's been a while...you know since he did all this....maybe there were more heirs at one point. Maybe they just never found his chamber," Harry tilted his head and looked around, "it is weird that no one else ever found this place."

Tom shook his head, holding the book back up to Harry, "that isn't important. What do you know of unbreakable vows?"

"Uh, I don't," Harry said simply.

Tom's face softened, the frantic energy fading to fond calm, "unbreakable vows are made between two people to assure that pacts are held up. However, they are not exactly unbreakable. See, one can go around them, though the person will die. This is no real problem for someone who has taken steps to assure that their death won't be permanent or those who have hidden some of their life force in an object."

"The Horcruxes...."

"Exactly," Tom nodded curtly, "there must also be a third party to an unbreakable vow, someone to witness and cast the spell between the participating parties, and well...for obvious reason, we don't want to go down that path."

Harry gaped at him, "you want to do an unbreakable vow?"

"No. I want to do something much more powerful and lasting than that," Tom's smile was nearly feral as he held the book back up to Harry, his finger tapping just under a line of swurvy text that read, 'Blood Bond.'

If Harry had been gawking before there might not even be a word for what he was doing as Tom set off for the rings and rings of candles in a flurry.

A Blood Bond...well that sounded pleasant. Down right cheery. Nothing bad could ever happen with that.

"Er, Tom..."

He turned back to Harry and, seeming to realize that he hadn't been followed, picked his way to the outer ring of candles and held out his hand, "it's safe. I promise, Harry. If there's any potential harm to anyone it's to myself," Tom took a deep breath and left the circle to stand by Harry's side again, "I could never harm you, and that's why I need to do this...to make sure that there is no future where you could be harmed."

"But..." Harry's head buzzed, or perhaps that was his ears or the very air itself, "you could be hurt, and I..."

Tom shook his head, "Salazar Slytherin made this particular bonding ritual for his most loyal followers, people he wouldn't want to harm, to be preformed with himself, so we know that it will be safe for you, to assure that the one initiating the bond would always stay loyal to him."

"But-"

"It differs from a vow because it cannot be broken, and it only requires the two of us...or possibly only me, so long as I have a sample of your blood."

"Tom?"

But Tom did not appear to hear, he kept on, "unlike the vows. It won't allow the one who initiates it to go against their bonded...well...Slytherin would have wanted them to call him their leader, but that doesn't quite work for us."

"Tom!" Harry said sharply, drawing Tom's dark and faraway gaze back to him, "Tom this sounds dangerous. It...well, it sounds like mind control or something."

Tom, thankfully, seemed to take Harry's worries into account, he was silent for several long seconds as he looked to the book, then back to Harry, and finally shook his head. "Not mind control. I already don't

want to hurt you, this just makes sure that, no matter the future, I can't."

"But what if you change your mind?" Harry blurted out, only after realizing how detrimental to his health it might be to say Tom shouldn't do this in case he decided he'd like to be Voldemort after all. "What I mean is...We, er," he blushed furiously, this was not, at all, how he wanted to have this conversation, "we, er....like each other, right?"

In answer, Tom swept forward, pulling Harry into a kiss and embrace that left him light headed and rather heated, and did nothing, at all, for his wildly uncontrollable blushing.

"Right...ah....Well," he cleared his throat, still gripping Tom's robes and trying not to look into his smirking, stupidly handsome face so he wouldn't have to pick whether to hit him or kiss him. "What I was trying to say...we like each other now, but what if that...changes?"

"Harry," Tom tucked the book under one arm and took Harry's hands in his own, "you could go back with your friends, destroy everything I have and leave me here a lone, and I can assure you that I will never regret this....Harry?"

Harry had hidden his face in Tom's shoulder when it all became too much. He took deep, even breaths and tried to will his throat to work and his eyes to not burn, "if you make me cry I'll be so angry with you," was all he managed to say, but it was enough for the tension in Tom's shoulders to ease.

He laughed, wrapping his arms around Harry's boney shoulder, "let me do this?"

"If it isn't harmful, then why don't others do it?" Harry asked, moving his face so that he was speaking into Tom's neck and not his chest.

Tom shrugged, "the ministry has always frowned on anything that could be seen as pushing a witch or wizard into positions of open servitude. There's a chance this particular ritual was simply lost in time due to a misunderstanding of its intent. Though, it is just as likely that Slytherin never shared it with the masses."

That did seem likely...there was nothing that seemed overtly dark about it...not that Harry was sure he would be able to tell what made a particular ritual dark or not. Was it the intent, or the ingredients? Were there parts of the day or night that were better for dark magic

than others?

That really felt like something he should know.

"If it messes up...or...or, if it causes you pain, can we stop?"

There was a moment when Harry thought that Tom would simply say yes, but what he said was, "I'm not sure, but I still want to go through with it."

Harry nodded, "what do we have to do?"

With a soft smile, Tom pulled Harry into the rings of candles, "it should be done in a circle. This one was already here when I first found the chamber."

"I don't remember it," Harry said distractedly, "there definitely weren't any candles."

"Here, stand," Tom took Harry by the shoulders once they were in the large, candleless centre, "stand here. I'm going to go and get the rest of the things we'll need." Tom went off in the opposite direction of the bookcase to a table cut from the same stone as the rest of the room. From there he selected a few tools that Harry couldn't see and carried them back to Harry and the circle in a black clothed bundle that he sat on the floor.

"How do you know this ritual?" Harry asked, trying to settle his nerves as the bundle opened and a wickedly sharp blade caught the flickering light.

"When I ran out of homework in the summers and things at the shop were slow, I would come here. I read all of his books in the first year after finding the chamber."

Harry couldn't help but laugh, "You're just like Hermione, she would have done the same too."

Tom tensed, for just a moment before his shoulder shook with laughter, "I suppose I am," he flashed Harry a bright grin before going back to work.

From the bundle he took a little jar of coarse black powder, he walked counterclockwise around the circle, sprinkling it as he went. When he had completed the circle the air around them shimmered and settled into a sort of shield with a rainbow sheen.

Harry was too entranced in the shimmering veil around them to pay a lot of attention to what else Tom was doing, a part of him was curious as what was going on, but a larger part was too nervous to look. He still trusted Tom, believed he wouldn't do anything to hurt Harry, at least not intentionally.

"Alright, we're ready," Tom said, standing from his crouch where he had done something with the knife and a large chunk of rose quarts and a wooden bowl of salt. "The rest is very straight forward."

"Okay...what do we do?"

"The books says that we both need to be in the centre," Tom moved them around until they were in the middle and then lowered himself to his knees.

"Um...should I?" It felt terribly wrong to be the only one standing, being the one to look down on Tom, now about level with Harry's shoulder.

Tom shook his head, "no, you're doing perfectly," the books was open by his knee on the floor, he spread it flat with one long finger, trailing over the serpentine script, "there are words I'm supposed to say but they aren't quite right...more of an act of fealty than what we want." He tapped a finger idly on the yellowed page, "perhaps the words don't matter."

"I think the words must matter, Tom," Harry said frantically, "aren't they sort an important part of any ritual?" This was sounding like a worse idea by second, but Tom was already shaking his head.

"Words, and even how one waves their wand, are really second to intent as far as magic is concerned, Harry. Think of acts of undirected juvenile magic, those that we preform before ever learning what magic is. There are no words of power there, no structured movements, just intent. If anything, wands and words are just focus points for one's magical energy."

Harry didn't know enough about magical theory to contest any of that, and wished he had been able to run that by Hermione real quick, or a teacher, at the very least. He shifted uneasily, his hands still held in Tom's loose, one handed grip as he thought it through.

"I suppose," Harry said softly, worrying his lip, "you could say nothing and just...feel what you want," maybe it wouldn't work. If he didn't do the words like they were supposed to, maybe the ritual just wouldn't

do anything.

Best case scenario, honestly.

Tom nodded and looked up from the book with a smile, "fantastic idea. Quicker than trying to come up with a rhyme to fit our purpose."

"It rhymed?"

"This particular ritual, unfortunately, yes." Tom said dryly, then he took one of Harry's hands in each of his own, facing him fully now, "just relax," he said with another reassuring smile, though Harry could feel nothing but nerves between the both of them. Tom moved Harry's hands palms up, cupping each one in his own hand, his thumbs pressed into the centre of Harry's palms.

For a long moment there was nothing but the sputtering of candles and the ever shifting iridescent haze of the air around them. Harry was certain the ritual wouldn't work without the words. He would have to convince Tom that their future would be one of peace not because he pledged so to Harry, but because Harry was going to stay with Tom and make sure he didn't fall down a path to darkness, despair, and ruin.

The real question was how long would they stand in this chilly room before Tom would listen to reason about it all?

Then a warmth sufficed him. It was sudden and all encompassing, he might have brushed it off as a figment of his imagination, the chill of the room seeping so far into his bones for so long that he was starting to feel warmed by it, except that what he could see of Tom's features smoothed out, his shoulders relaxing and he released a long held breath.

For several more minutes nothing happened, so far that Harry could tell. He stood over Tom, who held his head bowed over his and Harry's clasped hands and not a sound could be heard in the massive room. Then Tom released one of Harry's hands to reach down for the knife, he still wore a contented smile on his face, though the nerves that wracked through Harry spiked.

"I really do feel as though we should say something...poignant, for the occasion," though all he did was pull one of Harry's hands forward, his own still cupped around Harry's smaller one, "this will hurt a little," Tom said softly just before pressing a kiss to Harry's palm, followed immediately by the cool edge of the blade.

Even knowing that it was coming, the sharp pain was a surprise, it was quick though. A thin, even line drawn on his palm and then Tom removed his hand from around Harry's and swiftly performed the same slash on himself. Tom dropped the knife, letting it bounce carelessly on the floor, sending crashing echoes through the chamber, but he was far too occupied with his ritual to notice. Harry had kept his hand how Tom had left it, slightly cupped, allowing the spilt blood to pool there, Tom positioned his hand under Harry's, tipping it just enough to spill the blood into his own wound. Harry cringed, it seemed horribly unsanitary...maybe that was why the ministry didn't like this sort of thing.

Before he could recoil any further though, Tom brought their hands together, palm to palm, blood to blood. He held Harry's hand tightly between both of his, his forehead pressed to where they were join and said one breathlessly whispered word.

"Ligare!"

Harry had honestly expected nothing to happen. It was a rushed ritual without words, it sounded more like blood oaths muggle children in movies did. Not something actual wizards got up to in ancient, corroding chambers.

Thus, he was completely unprepared for the heat, running like scalding liquid through his veins, from the palm of his hand down through his limbs, fingers, toes, his heart. It all burned with a sweet intensity.

He had thought they'd had a connection before. The bright glimmer of energy between them that allowed them little snippets into each other's emotions. Allowed them to share dreams. Allowed them to get closer to each other than most would think possible. It had felt so vast, so potent...yet it was nothing but a shadow compared to this. A single flickering flame next to the blazing sun.

Tom was there. He was everywhere. He coursed through Harry's veins, he was the air that filled Harry's lungs. He was light and darkness, and everything in between. He could feel Tom's surprise and elation, as the spellbinding took hold, as though it were his own.

With a gasp he opened his eyes and met Tom's, surprise he knew he mirrored shone in dark brown eyes, though it quickly faded, turning darker, smoldering. Like a switch had been flipped, the warmth that ran through Harry taking on a more demanding presence.

There were too many sensations all overlapping, one on top of the other in fast succession that it was too much to sort them all out. Tom's lips were on his lips. Then his jaw. Then his neck. Tom's hands were everywhere, dizzying in their frenzy to touch and pull everything all at once.

The sudden rush, the frantic pulse of the moment, thankfully, slowed. Harry blinked and Tom was lowering him down onto the soft, warm ground, and Tom was above him, looking at him as though he had never seen Harry properly before. It wasn't until the warmth of Tom's skin touched his own that Harry even realized they had lost their robes, he couldn't recall doing so, and right then couldn't think of why it would matter.

"You're beautiful," Tom's voice was soft, reverent. Something that Harry could now feel completely. Tom's lips were back on his own and he pressed the expanse of his naked body down over Harry's, engulfing him in warmth. Everything slowed, then narrowed down to just them. Just Tom. No dark, cavernous chamber, no worries about uncertain futures.

They had explored one another, as any young couple would. But dreams were no match for reality no matter how nice they were, and the little they gotten up to in the real world had been hurried and infrequent.

Now, Tom's hands left a blazing trail down his chest, brushing over nipples budded from the chill air and down to his stomach. They were so much larger than Harry ever realized, big and strong and protective. And when they went lower, Harry easily made room for them, bringing his leg ups and around Tom's waist.

Tom did something then, cast a spell without words or motion, there was no change in the slow, hungry movements of his lips, no hitch of breath or twitch of a finger. Yet the spell was cast and the magic flowed, and Harry felt it like it had been his own. He had no idea what the spell might have been, couldn't even find it in him to care much, as Tom claimed his lips once more. Usually so cold, he left a burning path as his hands snaked further down Harry's body.

Tom cupped Harry's sex, squeezing gently, drawing a gasp from him as that had Harry scrabbling for purchase on Tom's back with desperate fingers. But he was moving on quickly, fingers running over Harry's surprisingly slick rim, before slipping in with ease.

Hanging on to purposeful thought was suddenly beyond him, too small of a part of himself begged to be inquisitive, how and why did Tom know a spell for lubrication? Should they really be doing this on a damp and cold floor? Why wasn't the floor damp and cold anymore?

Beyond that he had thought of what this would like enough times, usually alone in the bath, that he, momentarily, was overly concerned with remembering every impossibly overwhelming detail.

Then the pressure grew as Tom added another finger, twisting his hand as he plunged deeper, his kissing turning desperate, hungry once more, and every thought was quickly ripped from Harry's mind. Replaced with nothing that wasn't Tom. His body, warm and solid above Harry, his hands, his mouth, his very emotion as they flowed, unfettered, between them.

Quicker than he had expected, but not soon enough by far, Tom was moving back, removing his fingers, and bringing his hand up to Harry's thigh, raising it to better position himself between Harry's legs, only to hold still. Gazing down at Harry, his breaths coming fast. He opened his mouth, lips red from his ravishment, as though he wished to say something. Harry could feel it. The struggle to fit words in the moment. To give voice to the enormous feeling that Tom had never encountered before. Had no word for. No idea how to handle. But Harry understood.

It was love.

Harry moved his hands from their white knuckled grip of Tom's shoulders to cup his face. He pushed everything else away, the excitement of the moment. The fear of the unknown. The doubt of the future. He only wanted Tom to sense that Harry understood. That he felt the same.

Jade green eyes looked into rich, amber brown, and Harry whispered, "I love you too."

Tom's lips were back on his instantly, love, pure and electric raced between them and finally. Finally! Tom pushed into him, slow, tenderness radiating between them through every inch of movement, and the careful strength of his hands as they held Harry close.

Any initial discomfort that might have been was swallowed by the feedback of Tom's own pleasure and how he perfectly slid into Harry, lighting up his nerves.

With a gasp Harry's head fell back, a moan slipping through his lips. Tom took that as invitation, latching onto Harry's neck to kiss bruises against his neck and shoulder as he began to thrust into him, hard and slow, and so very right. And suddenly Harry couldn't hold back any sounds that slipped his lips if he had wanted. They echoed over the damp walls and moss slicked floors, reverberating through the blinding darkness beyond warmth of the flickering sea of candles that surrounded them.

They built to a frenzied peak quickly. Pleasure on top of pleasure. Impossible to separate from each other. Harry's hands clutched frantically across Tom's broad back, nails digging in so desperately they must have drawn blood, but he could not let go, "Tom!" He managed to gasp out, a warning, a prayer of sorts, as everything within him crested.

There was a growl from Tom in response, feral and deep. With a final, powerful, thrust, Harry's hold crumbled. The dual sensation of both his and Tom's release was both numbing and exhilarating. The press of their bodies, so close they could be one. The way Harry could feel Tom pulse within him as his own body squeezed around Tom's length.

They were still connected when the world settled back around him, sticky and exhausted. And absolutely, amazingly perfect. His every nerve hummed with their shared love and satisfaction. Tom had relented the sharp nips he had worried into Harry's skin, to pepper gentle kisses across his neck and jaw instead. Seemingly lost in the feel and shape of Harry's skin over his lips, until Harry was able to lift a leaden arm up to run chilled fingers through Tom's hair.

Tom pulled back, hands taking over to touch every inch of Harry's face they could as they smoothed his hair back and pressed over the apple of his cheeks, his brow, his jaw.

"You're amazing," Tom said, his voice hoarse and nearly reverent. He took a deep breath, something in him stilling, perched, ready to flee. Though there was nothing but determination in his dark eyes. He said, "I do...you know," this throat bobbed with nerves, but he pressed on, "love you."

The expression, 'so happy I could burst,' had never really meant anything to Harry before. Until that moment. For surely he would combust with how much joy he felt. There was simply too much of it. It was one thing to know, to feel what Tom felt for him. It was another that Tom trusted him to say it out loud. He couldn't help it, his

laughter bounced off the walls in shivering peals, and the only thing that stopped it was Tom as he captured Harry's lips for another, lingering, kiss.

In the end they had to move when Tom's charm on the floor, to make it soft and warm, and free of water and slime, began to vanish. They help each other back into their robes, taking many stops along the way to trade wide smiles and kisses that were made clumsy in haste and by hardly concealed joy.

They left the knife and tools forgotten where they lay on the floor, Tom extinguishing the candles with a careless snap of his fingers. The giant carved doors falling shut behind them with a clash that was lost to them in their reverie.

Tom, so careful as he helped Harry back through the passage, stole long moments on their way through the halls to simply hold him and be held in return. Any boundary and wall that had been held between them for fear, of the future, of themselves and of each other, where now gone.

And as Tom pressed him against the wall of another dark corner of the still and silent castle, Harry was unbelievably happy to have followed Tom to the chamber. That Tom's crazy ritual had actually worked.

And he was beyond ready to walk hand and hand with Tom for the rest of time.

Chapter End Notes

(Edit: I had no idea there was a blood pact situation between Dumbledore and Grindelwald in the fantastic beasts movie...I never saw it, I don't plan to. This was just a happy coincidence)

Whew, welcome back!

Wasn't that fun!?

To be clear I don't condone the use of blood bonding rituals as a fast fix for relationship troubles. But, hey, it seemed to work out okay here.

Tom is right, of course, that intent is the most important thing in a ritual, though words do, of course have power. Ligare means bind, so Tom thought it would work well for this. But it is also the base for the word religion... so it's more like bind to a

god...but well, we knew he already thought the world of Harry to begin with.

All jokes aside, I want to make sure you guys know this didn't actually change how they felt for one another. It simple made them aware of each other's preexisting feelings.

I don't think there is anything else to cover here...

Hmm?

What was that?

You say you hear yelling from the cabinet behind me?

You say it sounds like Abraxas?

laughs giddily

My silly darlings, it's nothing. Just your imaginations.

(*yelling back at the cabinet* Shut up in there, you'll get your chance to speak soon!)

Now, run along my dears, and take care out there. Thank you so much for stopping by to read and I look forward to seeing you

Next Time!

Harry has a difficult talks with his friends.

Tom and Harry can't keep their hands to themselves and some people don't like it.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The morning after the bond ritual, a day with the Weasley/Granger bunch!

Chapter Notes

It's been 10 billion years, and I'm sorry.

This has just been an awful year for words. But I managed to wrap this chapter up! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

For the first time in his life, Tom dreamed.

It came to him in snatches here and there. Harry was there, but of course he was. They were at the ocean, basking in the sun warmed sand. Shoes long abandoned next to a forgotten chessboard and an open book. Harry spoke, the syllables twisted, hissing parseltongue, and though Tom couldn't focus on the words, he paid rapt attention all the same. At some point in the dream Harry moved to his arms where he kissed softly at Tom's jaw and whispered hisses of, "I love you," in his ear.

In his arms Harry, warm and solid, moved restlessly. A little at first and then more forceful, when he said, "Tom!" plainly spoken and English, Tom jerked awake instantly, pulled from the warmth of slumber into the dull illumination of his room.

Harry was still there, still in his arms. Sometime in the night Tom must have pulled him close, tucking Harry practically under himself so that he could tangle their legs together and bury his face in Harry's neck. For once Harry was wide awake when Tom wanted nothing more than to press his eyes to his pillow and fall back to sleep with Harry's scent on his tongue and heart steadily beating against Tom's own.

But Harry was not to be ignored.

"Tom," he said again, and, now that he was awake, Tom caught the hint of desperation in it, "Tom, it's looking at us."

That certainly worked in waking him up the rest of the way. Tom

twisted to see what in the world Harry could be talking about, catching movement out of the corner of his eye from above. With a groan Tom knew what it was, grindylow. He flicked his arm at it, a haphazard cascade of sparks flew from his palm to the ceiling, startling the creature off. The stretch, once started, took over on its own, turning into a full blown yawn.

Harry was smirking at him when he finished, green eyes glittering in the low light, "sleep well?" he asked, playful, "you know, you really should construct some sort of curtain."

Tom laughed softly, "let them look," there was certainly something for them to see that morning. Every second of their time in the Chamber was burned into the fibre of his being. The ritual replayed itself in his head with stark clarity. The same exhilaration and....love, he had felt in the heat of the ritual still thrummed through him, called for his complete attention.

He had not been able to rest until they were back in his room, Harry safe in his arms once more and no one around to see them, to take him away. Coming face to face with the fact that he, Tom Riddle, was the single most deadly thing in Harry's life, the thing that was almost certainly what would end him, had not been an easy truth to come to terms with. He had needed to see Harry, happy, whole and safe, for himself. Unable to let him out of his sight, out of his grasp, until sleep had finally stolen upon him.

It did not sound like a terrible way to pass the day, but already Harry was stirring. He had retained his underrobe in the night, not that the sheer silk had stopped Tom from mapping the planes of his skin again and again. The reminder was enough to have Tom reaching for Harry as he slid out of bed, his hand falling uselessly to the mattress as Harry slipped out of his grip.

"We have to meet Ron and Hermione, and Fred and George, in Hogsmeade today," Harry reminded him, though Tom had not forgotten. He tracked Harry's movements as he picked his way through their discarded clothing of the night before, for once Tom had not felt compelled to put every last thing in its rightful place.

With great reluctance Tom left the bed himself and didn't so much as reach for a shirt to cover up with, choosing to add to his day of firsts by trekking across the room in the buff. It was as though he was now standing on the edge of a vast valley, looking down at all the things that had ever darkened his door with worry before and wondering

why he had ever been afraid or angry at any of it in the first place.

Euphoria kept washing over him in unbidden waves, catching him by surprise. Making him feel light headed and giddy before settling into a constant, pleasing warmth. From the corner of his eye Tom tried to watch Harry as he went about his morning ritual, combing his hair out, picking a robe, a dark crimson one that morning, but it did not seem that Harry was having quite the same trouble with sensations as Tom was.

Or perhaps this was how he felt all the time...

Outstanding.

Tom convinced Harry that they should drop by the Great Hall, grab some food and then walk down to the town. The day was warmer than the one before, the sun shining red and bright on the horizon as they walked the path of carefully cleared snow to the village. They walked in comforting silence, finishing their pilfered toast and hidden fruit. Try as he might to focus elsewhere, Tom's mind kept flashing back to the night before. The way the magic had flowed so freely during the spell, how totally it shifted his perceptions. How neither of them had been able to resist the power between them.

It seemed that Harry's mind was likewise occupied as he suddenly asked Tom, "How did you know to do that with the floor? I mean, that couldn't have been useful before..." he tapered off distractedly and Tom smiled softly, pulling him close.

"It was just a charm to make a less desirable surface soft and warm for a time. I saw it in a memoir of a wizard who had been stranded for a time after losing his wand, he had suffered a head injury preventing him from apparating and had needed to sleep on the floor of an inhospitable mountain. It doesn't hold very long though."

Harry nodded, "and the o-other one. " His blush was enough to tell Tom which spell in particular he meant.

He couldn't suppress a wistful sigh, "that is something that is passed through pure-blood families. I happened to be visiting the Black's manor when Orion's father thought it was time to give his progeny, 'The Talk.' Which included a vast number of very specialized spells that cover any manner of intimate encounters one might have."

At Harry's near scandalized expression Tom threw his head back and laughed.

"You're lying to me," he finally said, his eyes still large and round, "you did not learn about sex from Orion's dad! I...I can't believe snooty pure-bloods are passing those sorts of spells down to their children."

"Come now, Harry," Tom couldn't wipe the grin from his face, but managed to fight back his laughter. A little. "Continuation of one's line is very important to pure-bloods, or course they will have spells to make sure they only pass on their blood and names to those they choose worthy. That doesn't mean they won't enjoy themselves before then," he re-thought that, "or during and after."

Harry shook his head, "contraception spells?"

"Of course."

"And the others?"

Tom smirked at his still reddened cheeks, "What, the lubrication and preparation spell? Pleasure, as far as I'm aware, is a large part of the appeal of the act. Even 'snooty' pure-blood, as you put it, care about making their partners happy as well"

Hogmeade came into view, haloed by the golden morning sun, icicles dripped off of tiled roofs and fountains misted in the cool breeze. Already the streets were busy with bleary eyed locals leaving homes to open shops and start their days. They headed straight for the Hog's Head, it was just as dark and gloomy as always. Inside Ron and Hermione, seated at a small table for four, were the only patrons there. Ron was eating a plate overflowing with sausages and eggs while Hermione clutched a mug of steaming tea so tightly the color bled from her fingers. Neither looked up until Tom and Harry were upon them, Harry clearing his throat and waving an uncertain hello.

Hermione shot up, smoothing her robes and wringing her hands. Ron only waved back before ducking his head over his plate once more.

"Harry," Hermion said breathlessly, pulling him from Tom's side and into a hug, "I'm so sorry about yesterday! I..."

Harry deftly moved her to sit back in her seat and sat down next to her, leaving Tom to walk around the table to take the last chair, between a ravenous Ron and hysterical Hermione.

Harry shook his head at something Hermione had said, he took a deep breath and Tom could feel how much pain was still there, along with determination. "There's no reason to be sorry. We were all a little

overwhelmed yesterday, but it's fine," he smiled, his eyes locking with Tom's across the table, "everything is okay now."

Hermione followed his gaze, jumping a little as though she had not realized Tom was even there, let alone behind her. Then her steady, piercing gaze jumped between the two of them. "What happened last night? Something's different..."

Harry's panic shot through Tom, though he was quite impressed with Hermione's deductive skills, especially for one who had just been on the verge of tears a moment before. Harry stuttered out nervously, "nothing happened!"

"That's not entirely true, Harry, dear," the look Harry gave him was so betraying that Tom wanted to laugh, he settled on a fond smile, "you told me about your past. About Voldemort."

Ron looked up sharply, a little green in the face, "could you not say that...please."

Tom raised a brow at Harry who was just shaking his head and Hermione, who was pinching the bridge of her nose in obvious pain. "What should I say instead?"

"You-Know-Who," Ron said weakly.

Tom's lips twitched, "who? You mean me?"

Harry erupted into fitful laughter and even Hermione pressed her hands to her mouth as though to stifle her own giggles. Once Ron realized that he was, in fact, speaking with the bearer of the dreadful name he blushed furiously, "sorry...I, er...old habits."

Tom wove a hand to banish the thought, "think nothing of it. I was, after all, apparently quite the terror."

Harry cleared his throat loudly, "Where is Fred and George?"

"Here!" Suddenly the twins were behind Harry, each pulling up a chair to sit on either side of him, the look they sent Tom saying all too well that they expected him to feel jealous at the move, and that they were delighted by it.

He refused the urge to send them both flying across the room and even managed to smile, "and what were the two of you up to this fine morning? A brisk stroll around the village before day break? Causing

unknowable mischief on unsuspecting citizens?"

"That last one," Ron said, smirking into his breakfast as the closest twin swatted at his head.

"Actually," said the one closest to Hermione, "we were talking with a few of the locals."

"Introducing ourselves to the lovely townspeople, trying to make ourselves useful," the other one said.

"Helping old ladies across the street, rescuing kneazeles from trees. We even helped the owner of the stationary shop unload a shipment of ink, can you believe it?"

"No," Hermione said flatly.

"Why would you want-" Ron started, but then the twins spoke over him once more.

"Today was the day, right?" One said, then the other, "Harry was supposed to tell us all something big, yes?"

Harry cleared his throat again, how much he did not want to have this conversation flowing freely through their connection, Tom took pity on him, of course. "Why don't we go for a walk?" Tom suggested, rising from his seat, "It's a lovely day, no reason to stay cooped inside."

Harry jumped up eagerly, the others rising after him with varying levels of enthusiasm, Ron particularly looked mournful about the last bits of food on his plate. Tom wrapped an arm around Harry once they were out and allowed him to lead them where he wanted. It was no surprise they ended back up at the fountain from the day before, the water flowing freely from the tip of the unicorn's horn, so far from the soft bustle of the town to give them privacy, not far enough away that they felt hidden. Harry wandered over to the side of the fountain, removed one of his fitted gloves and dragged his hand through the frigid water.

Tom's hand ached in response.

He tried not to hover. Not to rush over and snatch Harry back from the frozen water and wrap him up. He breathed through the sensations and feelings that were not his own and stood out of the way.

"I'm not going back," Harry said softly at first, then turned to his friends. They had stopped, stunned, Hermione reaching for something in her robe had stopped, pulling her hand back. Ron Simply looked confused, and the twins shared a look between themselves. Harry said it again, louder, steadier, "I'm not going back with you."

"Harry," Hermione began, exasperation, and possibly anger, already leaking into her voice, "you have to."

"I don't. Actually," Harry said with a little laugh. "Why should I?"

Hermione scoffed while the others appeared to still be getting their bearings on what Harry had just announced. She threw her hands in the air. "Why? The war! Your family! Us! You have a life there, Harry, you can't just turn away from it."

Anger simmered through Harry, but he did not lash back, Tom moved to stand, not quite between them, simply close enough that if need be, he could intervene. Harry shook his head, "The war?" Harry met her tone with just as much vehemence, "if, for obvious reasons, I haven't stopped the whole war from even happening, then I would like to restate what I proposed yesterday."

"What," she hissed, "that it'll wait?"

"Yes," Harry snapped easily.

"He's not wrong," Ron said, then held his hands up in front of himself before Hermione could yell at him too, "I'm just saying, the passage of time and all...he will eventually get there...to the war...assuming he isn't also right about-"

"We can't know what him being here, what him...interfering with the past, will do to our time." She threw her hands up in a range, "it's reckless to meddle with the past."

"We've done it before," Ron said again, Harry smiled at him and even Tom was starting to warm up to him a little. Hermione glared at Ron but didn't seem to have anything to add to that.

"I'm not changing my mind," Harry announced into the silence, he took a deep breath, looked to Tom, and said, "I'm happy here. Really happy, and...I don't want to lose that." He gripped his hands tightly before him and said once again, "there isn't anything you can say that will change my mind."

Hermione sputtered, red in the face and obviously too angry for words, Ron simply looked deeply confused, yet the twins shared a grin between them before stepping forward and announcing in merry tones.

"Since that went so well, we have something to add, Fred?" George stepped back to let his brother take centre stage, straightening the collar of his robes, "Thank you, George. After much consideration we have come to the very exciting conclusion that we too will not be returning to the future."

"No." Hermione's voice had come back to her in a rage, "have you all lost your minds?"

"The way we see it, Harry is right. Either the war is over now, because it never began, or it can wait until we're older and more experienced," George said matter of factly, Fred nodded and added, "I for one don't want to die because I am decades younger than the wizards who want us dead, and not to mention far less skilled in the art of war."

"No," Hermione erupted, pointing a finger at Ron who had opened his mouth, "and don't you dare say they have a point, because they don't," she took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of her nose as she explained, "we have no way of knowing if anything done in this timeline will affect ours for the good or bad. The future we go back to might not be any different, and it might be even worse! There is a reason that meddling with time is forbidden....or usually is."

"Once again," Harry said, crossing his arms over his chest, "I didn't have choice about coming back and, 'meddling.'"

"Yeah...seems weird that an old witch would just happen to have some very powerful necklace that would zip Harry back to exactly this time. That she'd just happen to know he was there on the platform that day...I mean...How do we know this wasn't meant to happen?" Ron said in a soft, obviously pacifying voice.

"Because it doesn't work like that, Ron!"

"In all fairness, no one outside of the ministry really knows how it works," Tom rose from the edge of the fountain, speaking for the first time. It was clear how this was going to play out, he was beyond ready to have an end put to it, "the fact of the matter is that Harry is here, he has made an impression that will certainly shape the future. As have all of you. His mysterious disappearance from this time would undoubtedly cause further chaos."

"And what about the 'chaos' his departure from our time caused?" Hermione cut in, Tom pressed on as though she hadn't.

"Further, I see no reason that his presence is needed elsewhere."

She threw her hands in the air once more, Tom feared for the continued health of her rotator cuffs. "Of course you don't!" she said, openly vexed, "I'm not listening to you anyway, you're the reason he needs to leave, now!"

"I told you, I spoke to Tom last night, he knows all about the future and what could have happened. It's fine now," Harry leaned against him.

"That's sort of what we wanted to speak to you about. See, Dumbledore told us something about...about You-Know-Who," Ron said with more than a few nervous glances Tom's way, "something really terrible and...dangerous."

Harry sighed, "of course he did. What is it now?"

"Well, your boyfriend," Hermione cut her eyes to Tom, behind her the twins giggled, "used very dark magic to create vessels to hide parts of his soul and spread them all over the place, which we have been tasked to find or else he can't be stopped and will, eventually, destroy the entire world." She stopped in a huff, looking at them as though waiting for them to be shocked or afraid.

"How many?" Harry asked conversationally.

"How many? That's what you say?" Hermione shrieked.

"Seven," Ron added a lot more helpfully.

Harry turned to him with a wry smile, "there's our answer."

"Indeed," Tom smirked, "it's a very obvious one, too. Seven is the lowest number of power. Not quite as powerful as thirteen would have been, yet less risk taking," he sighed, "I fear I'm too predictable."

Harry smiled back brightly, "I promise not to tell anyone."

"So this is a joke for you two?" Hermione snapped, along with Tom's patience.

"I'm certain it comes as a shock to you that we might have had an honest and thorough conversation about this very topic last night. The

situation is not that dire now, I can assure you, as there is only one horcrux at the moment, and I do not plan to make any others." Hermione just blinked at him, Tom took a deep breath and replaced his glare with something softer, open and friendly, "thank you for your concern though."

"Well, now that that's settled," Fred stepped forward once more. Or, who Tom thought might be Fred, he had taken his eyes from them long enough that they may have switched places just for fun. Whichever one it was gave them all a bright and eager smile, "we would like to go back to our previous statement. That you need not worry about Harry's wellbeing, because we are staying here too."

"No, you can't!" Hermione said at the same time as Ron, shaking his head, said, "mom would kill me if I came back without you two!"

"Well here's the thing," Fred began, George draped an arm around his shoulders and said, "much like you can't force Harry to come back, you can't force us back either."

Harry shifted in his arms, "er, well."

"Yes, I might have to agree with Hermione on this," Tom said, much to the shock of the others.

"It isn't as though I wouldn't want you to stay," Harry piped up, "I would like it if all of you could stay. But I know that isn't possible. I wouldn't ask you to give up your lives."

Hermione scoffed, "what about your life?"

Harry sighed, Tom could feel his grief and interfered, "his life is here now."

"As is ours," Fred cut back in smoothly, "I know you think it rash, but I assure we have thought this out."

"What, since last night?" Ron asked in frustration.

"No, our perpetually ignorant little brother," George said, reaching over to pat Ron on the head as though he were a child, "this has been on our minds ever since Dumbledore began working on the tokens."

"That was months ago!" Hermione gasped, "you never said anything."

"Undoubtedly Dumbledore would have seen to it that we did not go

along with you if he had thought we might stick around in the past permanently." Fred said.

"Then all the work we put in over the last year to appear as mature and reliable adults would have been for not." Added George.

"But why would you want to stay?" Ron asked.

The twins shared a look and grin, "we thought it would be a valuable business opportunity," George said.

"Ah," their questions from the day before made sense now, Tom asked, "what business?"

"Don't indulge them," Hermione begged, she ran her hands through her already wild hair, making it nearly stand on end.

"The joke shop business, Mr Riddle," Fred said cheerily, "you see, good old Gambol and Japes was established in the year 1985, and already it is a booming success."

"Branches all around Britain." George added.

"Flocked to by school children and the young at heart. It does well for itself."

"Not as well as Weasley's Wizard Wheezings, of course," George added.

"Of course," Fred nodded sagely.

"We see an opportunity to start sooner. Fresher," George spread his arms wide, "bring the shop to a completely untainted market."

"Insanity," Hermione whispered dreadfully.

"I don't even know what to say to that," Ron said faintly.

The twins smiled brightly, "a response isn't warranted," Fred said.

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea..." Harry said hesitantly, looking up at Tom. Worry flowed between them. But also something like hope.

Tom shrugged and tried to come across as comforting, "it isn't the best idea. They, I dare say, could alter the timeline more than you have. However, they do make some fair points." The twins, so far, had proved to be the only ones of Harry's visiting friends with a head on their shoulders. Hermione was wound far too tightly, and Ron seemed

to be level headed and supportive, yet his obvious fear of Hermione's ire brought him too firmly to heel. It was clear where Harry might have provided a level voice and much needed backbone to the trio, it was almost sad that he would not be returning with them.

Almost.

"Wha...what good points?" Ron asked faintly as Hermione groaned.

"I don't think I can listen to much more of this," she lamented, hurrying over to the fountain so that she could drop down to sit on the ledge.

Harry sighed, "I guess we could...I don't know...do something today. Go somewhere?" He looked to Tom hopefully.

"Splendid Idea, Harry," Tom turned a beaming smile on the rest of them, "you've been here this long, certainly a few more hours to actually talk things out and settle down will be fine. We can go into London."

"You can't leave grounds during the holidays, it's in the rules," the words seemed to be pulled from Hermione, almost painfully so, as though she could not stop them.

Tom pressed a hand to his chest, "I have received permission from my Head of House to visit London as need be at this time. And as Head Boy, and because no one will object either way, I give Harry permission to accompany me."

"I don't think it works that way," Hermione said weakly, before George bounded over and thumped her so hard on the back that she nearly fell off the ledge. "Lighten up, 'Mione, we'll go have a bite and unwind a little. Nothing world shattering there."

Tom had a feeling the twins could make a game of croquet world shattering if they so chose, but kept that opinion to himself. After instructing them to meet up in front of the Leaky Cauldron, Tom took Harry firmly in his arms to separate them away from the fountain and the early morning bustle of Hogsmeade. A smile on his face.

He had a feeling it was going to be a wonderful day.

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Tom had, of course, been right. Perhaps it was that Hogwarts was no longer in sight, or that it was impossible for Hermione to be in a terrible mood when she was learning something new, currently getting to touch first editions of beloved books. Whatever the reason, she and Ron had mellowed over the last hour of their impromptu shopping spree.

"It's going well," Harry said lowly, he, Tom, and Ron were standing near a stack labeled 'Histories', which Hermione hadn't fawned over yet. "I mean, she stopped yelling." Tom and Ron nodded along.

"I knew she would calm down when she saw books," Ron said sagely, "they're her therapy. Doesn't matter what books, just...books. Works like a dream!"

Fred and George bounded around a corner with an unmarked brown paper bag in hand and grins on their faces. "Where have you two been?" Harry asked with no real hope of an answer, both Ron and Tom were giving them appraising looks, though Ron's was more trepidation to Tom's silent amusement.

"Oh, just around," Fred dodged the question as Harry had suspected and George tucked the bag into his robes, "so, lunch?"

It was early, though dragging Hermione out of the bookshop and then landing on a place to eat took up a good chunk of time. After a warm meal back at the Leaky Cauldron, the easiest choice, everyone was feeling much more settled. Hermione had lost her pinched, fearful expression and Tom had managed to drag her into a conversation about rules. While Ron, Fred and George listened aptly as Harry told them about his new 'antique' broom, and the four of them swapped Quidditch stories until pudding was served.

"We'll need to be headed to Gringotts after this," George said into his tea, Fred nodding at his side.

"Why'd you wanna go to the bank?" Ron asked around a mouthful of tart.

"To deposit the gold we brought with us," Fred said as though it were the most obvious thing ever.

"You seriously can't be thinking of doing this?" Something about the food and the familiar setting seemed to have shaken Ron into

understanding exactly what his brothers were thinking, "what about mom and dad? Ginny? Bill and Charlie, are you just going to forget them?"

"Don't be absurd, Ron," George grumbled, Fred said, "We left everyone letters explaining what we were doing. They should have been delivered by now."

"Dumbledore won't allow you to stay in the past," Hermione pointed out, Harry had to nod, that seemed rather likely.

"We will still have the tokens. We can jump whenever we want. Should the need arise. Beyond that, if Dumbledore wants us back so badly, he can come get us."

"And you're okay with never seeing them, seeing us, again?" Ron asked, waving his hand to include Hermione.

The twins shared a look, then said together, "there's no telling what the future will bring."

Hermione looked on the verge of another rage, her cheeks were turning red and her eyes bright. Then Tom leaned over and said in a low and soothing voice, "you can't force them, not now. They've obviously thought all this through and won't listen."

Hermione sighed, her brows were pinched and she looked as though her lunch was not settling quite as well as she would have liked, but she held back any warning, bit of insight into the follies of time travel, or nagging that she might have made. Forget wands and potions and brooms, that was real magic.

The air was crisp and fresh as they filed outside, the scents of woodsmoke and rich warm food filled the air. There weren't that many people around, and a group of students strolling the streets during their break didn't warrant that much attention. Harry was still not very used to being unseen. Tom garnered a few looks, and hellos and friendly waves from people who recognized him from his work at Borin and Burke's, he spared a moment to wave or return a call of, "hello, good to see you, as well," his hand never leaving Harry's shoulder or back, but other than that, gazes slide off of them without so much as a backwards glance.

They were greeted as warmly as anyone ever was in Gringotts. Fred and George marched up to an available clerk and whatever it was they said must have been enough to spark some interest as they were soon

shown into a side room. The attendant who came out to them didn't appear to be agitated, and Harry did his best to relax and not worry.

"Hey, things could turn out alright." Ron chirped suddenly, drawing all eyes to him.

Hermione scowled at him, "and how, exactly, do you figure that?"

"They could tell them they can't stay. I mean, the only reason Harry got to stay was because there was no way for him to get back, right?"

"Who's they?" Tom asked.

"The ministry?" Ron shrugged, "Dumbeldore....the goblin council. I don't know! There has to be someone in charge of keeping people from other times just swooping in to hunker in the past. Or whatever."

Hermione sighed in exasperation and Tom looked as though he only held back because she beat him to it. Harry shook his head, if only it were like that. "I don't think Dumbledore has anything to do with it, Ron. I got to stay because there was no other way, yeah, but it isn't like we told anyone else I was from the future. And all the goblins can really do is exchange their money....or not."

Ron deflated. He cast his gaze around the room in agitation but remained silent. Hermione stood in silence, fuming and biting her nails at odd intervals. Harry leaned against Tom, breathed in his warm scent, letting the pulse of his presence sooth Harry's frayed nerves, and thought about a world in which the Weasley twins moved to the past.

In the end it wasn't up to them. It never had been. Fred and George emerged from the room a mere thirty minutes later, laughing companionably with the goblin that had helped them. They shook hands at the door and the twins marched back to Harry and the others with matching grins.

"It's done!" Fred exclaimed.

"Done?" Hermione asked skeptically.

"It's all been settled," George filled in, smiling bright, "furthermore they sent word off to the Ministry, there'll be someone by in the next day to give us placements tests and we'll be able to take our places in Hogwarts for the next term."

"I don't believe it." Hermione groaned.

"The test isn't hard," Harry said, "the two of you should be fine." He smiled as Tom wrapped his arms around his shoulders, leaning back into the warm, strong chest.

"Shall we head to the school then?" Tom said, already turning to leave the bank, Fred and George followed closely with Hermione and Ron trudging along in the rear.

"Everything will turn out well." Tom said softly into Harry's hair.

"You're sure?"

"Now that I know what I'm working with, I can assure it."

Harry wasn't sure what that meant, but he would take all the help he could. It had been hard enough for him to get used to the past. Relaxing, therapeutic even, but hard as well. Knowing that Fred and George, two brash and comforting presence from his past, two people who had never asked him to be more than he was, would now be there for him was just a relief. Coupled with Tom knowing the truth. Harry didn't have to worry about hiding all the time.

He just wouldn't tell Hermione and Ron how glad he actually was.

They apparated to Hogsmeade, Fred and George needed to wait for the Ministry official there and Tom and Harry could walk back to school grounds. They appeared near the fountain, misting and lovely in the waning light of the afternoon.

"You could stay," Harry offered to a rather hesitant and worn looking Ron and Hermione. "We could have breakfast together." One last time. It went unsaid but they felt it. Harry swallowed past a lump in his throat, he had never said a more painful goodbye before. And they hadn't actually said the words yet. Tom placed a grounding hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

"We shouldn't," Hermione said weakly, tears already glistening in the corners of her dark eyes. "We shouldn't be here when the officials show up. There would be too many questions." She was right, of course. But they had shown up so quickly and now Harry wasn't sure he was ready for them to leave so soon. But there were so few options before him, and as much as he hated seeing them go, the other option, Harry leaving with them, was far more painful.

Harry hugged them both fiercely before they moved on to Fred and George.

"What if we get back and the war isn't over?" Ron asked quickly, though he tried to smile through it. "What if everything's the same only now we don't have Harry or Fred and George?"

Harry tried to smile lightly, "Look me up, then. I'll be the old git who hopefully knows enough magic by then to take on a full fledged Dark Lord."

"We would be nearly the same age, Harry." Tom said dryly.

Harry smirked back at him, "I'm not the one who told you to go for world domination in your golden years."

Harry sobered quickly as he turned back to his friends, with a small smile he added, "if you ever get the chance to come back to the past, you know where to find me."

"Yeah," Ron said softly, "we do."

In the end there wasn't anything to do but stand back and let them leave. The afternoon had faded to evening by the time Hermione and Ron took out their tokens. There was one extra that Ron pressed into Harry's hand, a smooth silver medallion embossed with a bird in flight, before stepping back. "Just in case you ever change your mind." Harry nodded and slipped it into his pocket. He wouldn't, but it was nice to know that he now had that option.

Ron and Hermione huddled closer together, both gripping their tokens until they were surrounded by a hazy glow. Then, before Harry's eyes, a portal like the one before opened up behind them and they were unceremoniously sucked through. Leaving nothing in their wake but a patch of flattened snow.

Harry blinked, trying to fight back the sting of tears as warm arms wrapped around him. Fred and George stood with them, staring at the spot where Ron and Hermione weren't, until the sun was fully down and they decided to call it a night. They had studying to do, they joked, before giving Harry one last hug a piece and heading off to their inn. Tom, silent and strong beside him, led Harry back to the castle grounds.

They crossed the snowy fields together, walked the hollow halls alone, and when finally the door to their room was shut and locked behind

them did Harry succumb to the bone deep weariness he felt.

Tom felt it too. He must have. His firm grip turned gentle, and careful. He took Harry's glasses, then helped him out of his robes and into the bed, following closely behind him.

Tom curled around him, held him close, running a hand through Harry's hair as he whispered promises of a long and happy future together into the warm skin of Harry's neck. Eventually Harry drifted off in the comfort and warmth of Tom's sincerity and love.

## Chapter End Notes

Hey, loves!

Really sorry for the delay. Hopefully the next chapter won't take another 6 months.

I started writing this in June so it's been too long for me to remember if I needed to say something about it...I guess all there is to say is that having Fred and George in the past was always part of the plan.

I really hope you guys enjoyed this! Thank you so much for sticking with me and the encouragement. I'll see you all

NEXT TIME!!

We'll look in on Abraxas and see how the twins settle into life in the past

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Summary

POV: Abraxas

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Things were easier in the morning.

Not easy. Not light and carefree by any means. But they didn't hurt as much as Harry thought they might. He hadn't given much thought to what he should say or do if ever presented with his friends again, and never in a million years would he have come up with the scenario that had unfolded. That he would be forced to choose. That he could not choose to return to them. And then, before he could really understand it, before he could think of what he should have said and done, they were gone.

It hurt.

But not as much as before. When he was alone. When there was nothing but him and a cold new world. It didn't even hurt like Sirius had hurt. He knew they were alive. That they were okay in their own time. And despite what Hermione might say, he knew in his heart that he had changed the future. He couldn't assure that there wouldn't be a war, though. That someone else might take up the mantle. Only that Tom wouldn't be the cause of it. That Voldemort would never rise. And who else could command such loyalty? Who else was strong enough to reign as he had? There wasn't another soul that could wind up so terrible.

Tom was already awake when Happy opened his eyes, which put the world a little bit more to rights. If there had been any aquatic onlookers this morning Tom had already taken care of it and gone back to his potion of trying to be a human blanket for Harry.

Who would have guessed that Tom Riddle, so stoic and dark and composed, was such a cuddler?

"They'll be fine." Tom assured him without asking what was wrong. It was nice that Harry could feel the sincerity there. The bond between them taking a lot of the guesswork out of reading each other.



Harry nodded, “and what about us, now that we have to live in a place where the twins aren’t being restrained by their mother?”

He didn’t need the connection between them to be aware of Tom’s amusement, his eyes brightened, his lips twitched towards a smile, then he took a deep breath and said in a somber tone, “they may be... chaotic, and wild. But they do not wish to see destruction. I don’t think we have much to worry about with them.”

Harry snorted in disbelief. “I’ll remind you you said that when they blow something up.”

“Is that likely?”

Harry just laughed, wiggled out of Tom’s arms and rolled out of bed. They had several more days before the end of break. Days in which there was nothing for them to do but bask in the warmth of the fire and each other. In the middle of the afternoon Harry received a letter from Fred saying that they finished their exams and would hear the results the next morning, but that they were assured a place in the school next term. Apparently they had created a story of running from the war after losing their family. If the ministry thought another set of orphans showing up without school records or identification was odd they didn’t seem to show it.

Until they could be placed into a dorm the twins were instructed to stay in their rooms at the Hog’s Head. Going to visit them was as good an excuse as any to leave the dorm and get a little fresh air, and it rounded out their days nicely. Not least of all because Tom actually seemed to enjoy their company. Telling them what he learned in his years of working on Knockturn Alley, helping them understand what might draw customers in this age.

And at night it was just the two of them. Uninterrupted. Uninhibited. They did their best to forget the rest of the world once the door shut behind them and they could fall, carefree and with vigor, into each other’s arms.

All in all, it was the best winter break Harry had ever had.

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Winter at Malfoy Manor was the same as always.

There were gifts and feasts and balls. If Abraxas never had to kiss another old and wrinkled crone's hand as he welcomed her to his home, or hear another inane joke from one of his grandfather's old friends it would be too soon.

Everything was bright and cheery. The halls were gayfully decorated with enchanted snow that drifted slow and endless from the arched and painted ceiling, conjured sprites flitted about to the long and twisting halls. The tables were adorned with holly and crystals carved to look like delicate snowflakes. Everywhere he turned there was laughter and cheer, and the heady scent of sweet wine and baked goods.

Abraxas hated it.

Somewhere between the silk wrapped boxes and the endless procession of crystal glasses brimming with sparkling wine, he had lost whatever joy he usually felt at this time of year. It had always been enough, coming home and experiencing the holidays as only a Malfoy could. Then returning to tell his peers of the festivities, show off his latest treasures, drink up their awe and envy. It was the best part of his entire year.

And now it was gone.

If he were being honest with himself it wasn't the parties that had become dull. It wasn't the food that had lost its flavor or that the drinks had gone weak. His spirits had been damped now for quite some time.

In his more poetic and self pitting moments, Abraxas would say that he had lost his heart when Tom cast him down from his side. it had been crushing, the betrayal. That someone he had invested so much time in, had held to such a high tier, would shun him. Shun all of them. For a pretty faced mudblood!

It didn't just go against everything Tom had said he stood for. It was practically a slap in the face of Salazar's great plan.

Tom was better than this. He was better than all of them. Smarter,

braver, stronger than the rest of them. He had ambition, charm, and a need to protect his own. He was exactly what Slytherin's heir should be.

And he had fallen under the spell of that little harpy.

Abraxas spent most of the holidays stewing in his rooms, coming down only when he must and leaving soon after. He had the house elves bring him food and drink, he refused visitors, he spent all of his time trying to work out how to handle the situation before him.

Alone he could do nothing.

The Roberts were fine but they were from a family of little influence. They didn't hold the sway that Abraxas needed. He had to pull more of the big names his way. The Blacks were an obvious choice. Alphard, the little weasel, had fallen prey to Harry's poisoned ways, but Orion could be made to see reason. And if he could convince Orion then he'd have an in on working his way through the rest. With enough support they could stage some sort of intervention with Tom. Make him see reason.

Put his focus back on what was important.

The betterment of the Wizarding World. Protecting what was theirs from those who were unworthy and unclean, yet still dared to attain what was above them.

It was a dilemma he had yet to work out by the time he was back on the train, hurtling towards the castle, and Tom, and the ever rushing march of time.

He shared a compartment with the Roberts cousins. Being subjected to only their useless and insipid chatter for months on end should have been enough of a penance for anyone. It was well past the time for him to get in good with the rest of pure-blood society once more. As sentiment only he seemed to hold as he was forced to sit halfway down the table in the Great Hall. The exact same place as before the break. No one even glanced at him.

He seethed silently, though. He was a Malfoy, and fallen from grace as he might be, he still had his pride.

Tom sat at the head of the table, as was his right. If not for the harpy at his side Abraxas could almost look at him and believe that things had never changed. That Tom would call them to a meeting, as was

his custom after any sort of break. And when the rest of the dorm shuffled off to bed the Knights would gather around the fire. It was never a meeting to discuss the future. To make plans or assign work. The first night back from Winter Break was a laid back affair, they called for mulled wine from the kitchen and they caught up with one another.

He pushed those thoughts from his mind. If Tom even held to such traditions this year Abraxas wouldn't be called. He would be forced to remain in the dorm, alone and forgotten, while everyone else mingled.

Evans would probably get to go.

It was best that he not dwell on these things. There was nothing he could do about them right then, and focusing on what was unattainable would be no help at all. And, perhaps, he would have succeeded. Would have been able to pry his eyes from the figure who had been a symbol of hope and power to him for so long.

If he hadn't seen the ring.

It caught the light with a sharp flash as Tom raised a hand to absently fix a strand of his hair. From what he could see, so far down the table, the band was slender, the glinting emerald wickedly bright. Understated, yet eye catching. If it had been placed on any finger other than Tom's right hand ring finger, Abraxas would have gladly fooled himself into thinking it a harmless accessory.

All plans to look away and forget were dashed when, for just a moment, he caught Orion's gaze across the table. In the second that their eyes met, shrewd grey and hooded black, he knew how he was going to reel in the aid he so desperately needed.

It was too loud in the hall, there was too much space between him and Tom's side of the table, but Abraxas and Orion were far from the only ones to see the ring and know what it meant. Eyes turned to them, and beside Tom, Harry blushed before pulling the cuff of his robe back just enough to show a pretty emerald bracelet. A near perfect match to Tom's ring. It wasn't traditional, yet the matching set was an obvious claim from both of them. An effective way to scream, 'we are a joined pair,' to any who might not know.

It was far worse than Abraxas had thought. The Siren had not only lured Tom to the edge of the ship, it had dug its claws into his flesh and was getting ready to drag him to his death.

All he could hope for was that Orion shared his concerns. Or, at the very least, could be made to see reason.

Attention was called to the front as the Headmaster rose to say a few pointless words to start the term. Abraxas had already begun to plan for a little tet et tet with Orion after hours, until an excited hum filled the room.

Trailing the Headmaster were two boys, red hair, freckles, bright eyes, identical. They wore school robes with no house affiliation. Transfers were common enough, but to have them so late in the year was a tad odd. There had been raids over the Winter Break, but he hadn't heard of any that were so devastating that they had driven wizards from their homes. Such attacks were often held out until the warmer months.

Dippet cleared his throat, "in these times, which keep on trying us, we must always be ready to welcome the weary and in need. We have with us today those that seek sanctuary and learning at our doors. So, we will quickly sort them and, for today, forgo our usual pleasantries and begin our feasting." Cheers followed his words, the twins behind him shared shrewd, excited looks, and behind them Dumbledore brought out the hat and stool.

Dippet took his seat and Dumblerdore turned to the twins with a fond smile, "First, let us have Mr Fred Hanley. Have a seat lad." Dumbledore said, sweeping his hand towards the stool. One of the boys broke off, sat upon the stool and accepted the hat with great gravity and placed it on his head.

Hanley. It was an old name. Not one the actual pureblood names. Not a sacred name for certain, but a good, old name all the same.

This Fred sat upon the stool for only a handful of seconds before the hat called out a gleeful, "Slytherin," and the table around Abraxas erupted in applause. Fred Hanley made his way, smiling bright and self assured, down from the dias and straight to the end of the table where Tom sat. Swiftly as you pleased a space was made for him, and there he sat, next Harry, as though he had any right to be seated so far up the table.

"George Hanley," Dumbledore's voice boomed over the commotion, and the second twin took the hat. It took a little longer this time. A minute, perhaps, wherein George Hanley sat stoic, a little mischievous grin on his face. Finally the hat announced, "Hufflepuff," to the

confusion of those around them and the joy of the next table over. It wasn't unheard of that twins would be separated. However it was far more likely that family ended up within the same house.

George Hanley made his way to the Hufflepuffs, sitting among them with a broad grin and many handshakes and jovial greetings. And with nothing else to see to, the elves unleashed the food and the feasting began.

Abraxas picked at the food around him, keeping an eye on Tom, and Harpy at his side.

He hardly noticed when dinner was over, only that he was standing with the others and following their path to the dungeons. He had yet to form a plan. Orion would be up late, and the only thing that came to mind was waylaying him on his way back to his bed. There were very few hiding spots within the common room. The dorms had been made with camaraderie in mind. For fellowship and not deceit.

Luckily the Malfoys had been raised to fathom threats from friends and foes alike. His own father had said that every Malfoy was born with their eyes open and vigilant. He had been given an invisibility cloak. Something to be used if ever an emergency arose where he needed to be made scarce.

No one watched him as he went straight to his room and to his wardrobe. The perks of having Tom order everyone to avoid him like a plague was that he was now nearly invisible himself. He dug around, grabbing a few effects and heading to the lavatory as though to bathe. No one said a word as he passed and no one batted an eye when, clad in his cloak, he slipped back through the dorm room and out into the hall.

He would hide in the study area. There were enough corners in there, it was blocked from the direct line of the hearth by the partitions and many a scattered sofa and wingback chair. He had every intention of doing just that. Except that, when he left the seventh year's dorm a soft, strained voice reached his ears.

They weren't exactly hidden. It was hard to hide in Slytherin House. Even so they were secluded, stationed between the pillars that separated the boy's dorms from the girls and tucked far enough in the back that someone would need to go out of their way to be close enough to hear them properly.

Luckily for Abraxas, neither boy could see him approach. Their

conversation went on unaware of a third party.

“Hanley?” Harry said, managing to be cutting and amused all at once.

Fred smiled wickedly, “it’s an old name, pure enough for this lot and common enough to not raise an eyebrow, Evans.” He said Harry’s surname as though it was some great joke.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest, “at least mine was my mother’s name.”

Fred barked a short laugh, “yeah, well, Prewitt is a little too known for that to work. The point was to not stand out, remember? That means new names without a history tied to them.”

“You’re right,” Harry sighed, his arms relaxing at his sides, “why is George in Hufflepuff, then?”

Fred had that mischievous smile back on. The one that said he had never done an honest deed in his life. He slung an arm over Harry’s shoulders, nigh engulfing him from with his greater height and bulk, and began to lead him off towards the common room. “That, my dear Harrykins, is simply a matter of branding.”

Abraxas watched them go, wrapped in an illusion, head spinning. The Hanley’s were friends with Harry. That made them untrustworthy. Perhaps another obstacle to freeing Tom and getting everything back the way it should be.

Without further ado he wove his way through the milling dorm to find a perch to await the night. More than ever he itched to put his plan, any plan, into action.

In the corner of the study area Abraxas couldn’t hear what was being said by the fire. The general population of the common room had cleared out hours ago, leaving him in shadow and silence. He dared not cast any charm to allow him to eavesdrop. The others might not be strong enough to catch it, but Tom would. The last thing he needed was to give himself away because a bout of merry laughter had his hackles raising to know what joke or tale had been so funny.

Were they laughing at him?

At his downfall?

At his seeming lack of confidants?

His hand itched to take his wand and start jinxings the lot of them. He breathed slow and deep. Inhale through his nose, exhale through his mouth. Lashing out would only ruin his plans before they even started. He needed to be level. He needed to think as Tom would think. Of the whole picture, and not simply what a few moments of anger could gain him.

It was an eternity before the Knights began to trickle back to their beds. He had been counting on old habits undying in Orion, and he was rewarded when at last Tom drifted gracefully from the room, leaving a lone figure by the fire.

He did not relinquish his grip on the cloak until he was by the fire, allowing it to drape down to his shoulders before dropping into a chair right next to Orion.

“I thought I felt your greasy eyes on me,” Orion said in greeting, never lifting his dark eyes from the flickering flames.

Abraxas gave a short bark of laughter, “no, you didn’t.”

“What do you want?”

Abraxas leaned back, a smug smile on his face, “we used to be friends, Black, or have you forgotten? I never needed to have a reason to chat with you before.”

“You have exactly five minutes to tell me what you want before I go find Tom.”

“Fine,” Abraxas snapped, he leaned forward over the arm of the chair to get closer to Orion, impart to him how vital this was, “I’m worried about Tom.”

Orion laughed then, humorless and short, “oh, I’m sure you are.”

“I am! Tell me. Look me in the eyes and tell me that you haven’t noticed a change in him.” He waited for the rebuff, the scoff, for Orion to simply stand and leave.

He did not.

Abraxas took a deep breath, “It’s Evans. I know it, you know it. Merlin’s beard, every Knight must have realized by now as well.”

Abraxas pounded his fist on the chair arm for emphasis. "When was the last time he spoke about his goals for the future? When was the last time he asked for information on the war, or planned our next moves after graduation?"

"As far as I was aware," Orion began slowly, thoughtful, "the plans were set and needed no further clarification."

"Is that what he said?" Abraxas asked, raising a pale eyebrow, "because I have only missed a handful of meetings and he had said no such thing before."

"It's implied," Orion said quickly, though he did not sound as sure and unruffled as usual.

"Tom would never leave anything up to implication and assumption. Not giving the whole of an account or listing out every single detail of a plan leaves it open to misunderstanding and failure."

Orion tilted his head into his hands, rubbing at his temple, "I need you to find the point of this conversation. Now."

"Tom needs our help," he raised a hand to halt any snide remark Orion might have towards that statement and rushed on, "Evans has changed him, we've decided that as fact. There's no point in arguing it further. The problem is that Tom's plans were not simply his, they were all of ours. A return to the old ways. The right way. A purification of our world. Through Tom it's possible. But not if that little mudblood corrupts him. Turns him from the path."

"We do not know his lineage," Orion said calmly. Abraxas wanted to hex him, "he speaks parseltongue."

"Evans is a muggle name," He said simply. He had checked a registry in the library, there were no wizards named Evans in Britain.

"Through some trickery he has learned parseltongue and bewitched Tom."

"And it's only going to get worse," he added quickly at Orion's scoff, "you saw the ring, you know what it means! How many propositions from pure-blood families has Tom gotten so far? I know my grandfather has sent him a few," for cousins that were not so distant, Abraxas' own betrothal was fast approaching and had been set for years. The Malfoys were always prepared. "I'm guessing the Blacks have not been idle either. And yet, with all the best matches in our world, he goes with a lone boy who simply appeared from nowhere."

No pedigree or class. Now these Hanleys, friends of Evans and another set of complete unknowns, are here and will no doubt have Tom's ear as well."

"And you know of this friendship, how?"

Abraxas bristled a moment, but he had not been in the wrong, "I overheard them speaking earlier when they thought themselves alone,"

"I suppose it's good to know you've taken up spying on everyone."

"It's not their real names," Abraxas pushed on, "Hanley, and possibly Evans as well. At least that Fred fellow, assuming that is his name, said something about being related to the prewitts."

"He's not," Orion said flatly, "and it would be idiotic for him to say so, as that is something we can easily find out for ourselves. The Prewitts have two children in Hogwarts already, we would know if they had others."

Abraxas took a deep, cleansing breath. This wasn't the path to take with Orion. He needed facts, anything less, even if Abraxas had heard it from the source, wasn't good enough for him to fall behind. It had to be written in stone and sealed with an unbreakable charm.

"Something isn't right with them, and I can't just go along ignoring it. Now you have agreed as much right here and now, so the only question left, Orion, is, are you willing to work with me to get to the bottom of it."

He waited, several long seconds of silence that had his teeth on edge and his hand aching to wrap around his wand and make Orion see reason. For good measure, and because if there was one thing he could say to tip the scales in his favor it was this, Abraxas leaned forward, eyes boring into Orion with as much sincerity and desperation he could muster, he added, "Please, Orion. For Tom."

Orion lifted his head from his hands, and Abraxas knew he had won. It was written in the tight line of his brow and the pinch of his thin lips. He regarded Abraxas for several long seconds before nodding curtly at whatever it was he saw there. And for the first time in months Abraxas was soaring. A weight lifted from his chest and finally he was breathing fresh air again.

For the first time in months he had purpose and an ally, even if it was just one. Others would follow Orion's sensible and forthright lead.

Soon he would be able to see the disruption in all of their lives, and once things were back to normal, once they were graduated and took their first steps out into the wider world, Abraxas would assure that the name, Malfoy, lived in pride and dignity alongside their fearless and magnanimous leader. Lord Voldemort.

Chapter End Notes

Hello dears! Welcome back!

Little bit of Harry (and Fred) this chapter BUT it was time to look in on Abraxas. I know there's been a lot of curiosity on how he's doing. The answer is....not great. Boy's got some problems.

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter! Thank you so much for reading and leaving great comments! I love them, and you guys!

I encourage you, if you're interested to look into the [Harry Potter Omegaverse Week!](#) The prompts are up and it'll run the 11-17 of April

The Yule Ball

Chapter Notes

I know it's been... a very long time. But it's been a hell of a few years and not in a good way.

Getting Covid, dealing with long covid foggiess, moving...five times! The death of my mom. It's been a ride. But I got off caffeine at the end of last year, feel better than I have in years and as a birthday gift to myself (it's friday if you're curious) I finished ALL my outstanding WIPs!

Yes that was a message for all the WIPs, but in short, I have finished this work. The last chapter will go up tomorrow!

Please Enjoy!

The twins, to absolutely no surprise to Harry, tested into the seventh year with flying colors. The scarce few days before the start of term Harry and Tom stood back and watched sweet talk their way into the hearts of their peers.

Fred Hanley was charming, charismatic, and thanks to a few of his wild stories about him and his brother and their war effort, quickly became known as one of the most cunning among them.

It didn't hurt that Tom and Harry liked him. Instantly winning him over to the entirety of the underclassmen and most of the upper.

During their time in the cafeteria and around the common areas it was quickly apparent that George was likewise having success with the other Hufflepuffs.

Ravenclaws...and Griffindors.

There was always a group of laughing students around him. Clapping him on the back, or running up to ask him this or that. All he would say when asked was that laughter caught more pixies than scowls did. Harry didn't know if that was true, but whatever George was doing had worked.

If his goal was to become one of the most popular students overnight, that is.

Which, it probably was.

The term started with little change. Harry still had his defense classes with the seventh year. Something Fred was overjoyed about. He instantly went on about how Harry had taught him and George much of what they knew about defensive magic, including how to cast a corporeal patronus. A feat the both impressed everyone, and led to more than a few requests for Harry to teach them as well.

Life became quite simple. Harry woke next to the person he loved most in the world. Went to class, spent time with friends in the common room, and fell asleep in Tom's arms to start the whole thing over again. There was little he could think of that would have made it better. It was as close to perfection as he had ever gotten before.

Until he remembered with bone chilling clarity.

The Yule Ball.

"It's not funny." Harry said firmly as Tom continued to laugh from the sofa in their room.

"I'm serious. I'm a terrible dancer. I'll make you look bad. We should just sit on the sidelines. Drink punch and hope there is good food."

"Harry, my love, this isn't a problem. Come here." Tom beckoned him forward and Harry trudged up to stand between his legs, allowing Tom to take his hands in his own. "Listen to me, dancing isn't that hard. And it doesn't matter if you are grand at it. I am, and one good dancer compensates for a poor one. Trust me."

When Harry didn't answer right away Tom stood and led him over to a cleared space in the room, placed Harry's hands, one on Tom's shoulders, the other he took in his hand, and then set his hand on Harry's lower back. "Like this," he said and began to move, leading with gentle pressure to Harry's back. "It's a lot easier this way, yes?"

Harry nodded, blushing a little. He hadn't thought about Tom leading, since he had been forced to lead before. But...this was nice. Tom knew what he was doing. His hands were firm and sure on Harry's body. It was actually a bit fun this way.

"Tell you what, we'll practice everyday after school or before bed until the dance. How does that sound?"

"Okay," Harry smiled up at him, "I think I can be ready by then."

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He shouldn't be nervous.

He had never been nervous in this situation before.

But this was...different

This wasn't Tom marching into the room and demanding obedience in a goal he had convinced a group of blood thirsty pure-bloods to fall in line behind.

No one knew it was easier to rile up a mob than to soothe one more than Tom did. He had relied on it in the past. It was why he was where he was now. Blood stature had gotten him through the door but there was a reason that he was the leader and not someone like Orion or Rosier. Blood purity only got one so far, having a goal and being able to work people up towards it went further.

But this was different.

Tom paused outside of the room and hesitated.

Again.

He needed to do this. Not just for Harry, but for himself. For their future. Harry had given up so much. Had so much taken from him. And it had all been Tom's fault.

But he could fix it.

One step at a time.

Behind the door the room was filled with his Knights. Waiting to hear his words, do his bidding. Rip the wizarding world to shreds all because Tom had been abandoned as a child and had carried that hurt with him until it festered. Until being the heir to Slytherin had given him a purpose to direct that anger.

It was time though.

Time to begin heading towards the end.

He took a deep breath and went into the room.

The soft chatter died down as he drew to his chair at the centre of the table. He sat and looked them all over as he always did. Some nodded, some smiled, some simply waited for him to say something. He was almost unsure where to start.

“My Knights, it has been some time since we last met. I hope that the winter break was fruitful for all of you.” That felt like something he might have said before. Suddenly he couldn’t remember how he would start things.

Being ruthless was so much easier.

“And your break certainly went well,” Orion said, looking pointedly at the ring on Tom’s finger. He hadn’t tried to hide it and now he turned his hand over to show it off.

“It most surely was, thank you for noticing.”

“So it’s true?” Greenglass asked, craning to get a better look from down the table, “you are courting Evans?”

“I am indeed.”

“And the twins? His friends.” Orion asked.

Tom laughed softly. “I can assure I’m not also courting the Hanley twins.”

There were soft chuckles around the table, a loosening of shoulders and broader smiles. Whatever had them on edge dissipated a bit.

Perhaps Tom’s mood was catching.

“Of course not, my Lord. I only meant to say that you have gotten to know them as well?”

Tom sighed, so that’s where this was going. “They are friends of Harry’s and have come here to be with him. So yes, we have become acquainted.”

“And you trust that?”

It wasn’t like Orion to question him. Despite the warm disposition that he had become accustomed to in Harry’s presence, Tom seethed with cold indignation. The longer he was outside of Harry’s company the

more color and warmth leached from him. It was like making the horcrux all over again.

"I do." He said flatly, leaving no room for doubt.

Or so it should have.

"I'm only concerned, my lord. They show up out of nowhere, with ambiguous backgrounds in war time. Getting close to you." He left the rest unsaid. That he thought it was suspicious. That Tom was being taken for a fool. That somehow they knew about his plans and were only getting in his good graces to win favors or to trick him somehow. Take from him. Beat him.

Tom had no doubts about Harry and his friends. It was impossible to. Tom felt what he felt. He had seen the events of the future if he had continued down this path. Harry was true and good, and his friends only wanted to help and protect him.

But others at the table nodded to Orion's words. They couldn't know the depths of Tom's devotion and trust. And he couldn't very well tell them that he had bonded his soul to another. Even the contracts between pure-blood arranged marriages were less binding than what he had done.

He took a deep breath and released it. This was a good time to start easing everyone towards a different path.

He held no illusions as to how most, if not all, would take it.

But he had to take that first step.

"Over the break," he began, turning back to the table as a whole, ignoring Orion's poorly hidden scowl, "I made a visit to a relation I recently became aware of." Those closest to him shifted forward, restless with excitement, the few of them that knew he had sought out the rest of Slytherins noble house simply held themselves smugly silent.

"What I found...was not for the faint of heart," there was a scattering of laughter through the room, "it made me question a few of my previous...tactics."

"Tactics?" Orion said lowly, frowning.

"I began to think about the decay of our kind. How we got where we



are. What we could do to make sure it is healed in the future."

"My Lord?" Annabell, a fifth year Ravenclaw who rarely spoke in the meetings, was now staring at him agape. She was not the only one. Tom tried not to flinch at the title.

Lord...

A dark Lord who had hurt Harry. Had scarred the future for many.

"What you're saying," Orion said, slow and thoughtful, "is that we need a different approach?"

"Yes."

"Something more dramatic?" Rosier asked. He too was usually silent, yet he was looking at Tom as though he needed to make sure he wouldn't spontaneously explode or something.

"I didn't think we were going to start phase two until after you were graduated, my Lord."

"If we're to start hunting I can contact my Uncle in Gloucester. He's already offered us the use of his house and tools."

"If we're speeding the plan along I want to bring back my propitiation for a lottery for-"

"Can start recruiting more then? We need to strengthen out numbers if-"

"My Auntie works for the Depart of Magical Law Enforcement, she said she could give me a list all known-"

Tom rose a hand and the flurry of voices died down. This...was going to be so much harder than he thought. How hadn't he realized how...bloodthirsty. How rabid. Everyone was. They wanted to eradicate the muggle-borns. They wanted to resolidify their place at the top of the magical food chain.

They were not going to take well to his change of heart.

"The Gaunts." He said into the rapt silence. "Were a pure-blood family that did not allow for fraternizing or associating with muggle-borns. And in the end they held little more power between them than your average squib."

The silence took on a harder edge. The weakening of the bloodlines, the increase in squibs and sterility were well known in their world. The cause though was something of a debate.

Tom had heard both sides and made his own conjectures about the problem. He had used their fear of muggles somehow siphoning magic for themselves to his own advantage more than once.

It would be so much easier fixing his future if he hadn't done such a good job setting the foundation for it in the first place.

"What exactly are you proposing then?" Orion asked.

How would they act if he said, 'my father is a muggle, who I let live, and I deeply believe it was his contribution that reawakened magic into the Gaunt bloodline,'?

He had no doubt that they remembered he had no name of his own when he first arrived. It was only as he found out his heritage that they came to listen to him. To follow him. He was the heir of the house, yes. But he was also the strongest among them. They would have not followed him if he hadn't been powerful. Or, at the very least, wouldn't have followed him to such an extent.

It was power they wanted. For themselves. For the weakening families. And Tom had spent the better part of seven years telling them the way to such glory was in the killing and subjectification of muggles and muggle-borns.

"Nothing. At this moment." Tom said, keeping his voice calm, his expression neutral. As though he still had a lot to think over. "For the time being we are not moving forward with the plans."

Silence, cold and absolute, met his words. He expected push back. He had expected a few explosions, both verbal and actual. This...this was much worse.

A gilded clock on the wall chimed the hour, as it had done every meeting before now. Tom had never been so happy to hear it.

"You're dismissed. I will contact you when we are to meet again." It wouldn't be for some time.

Maybe never, if he could pull that off.

Tom rose, ignoring the stares as he walked from the room, back

straight, arrogant and as collected as ever. He closed the door being him with a deafening snap.

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He hadn't wanted to believe it. Abraxas was a prat. He had just been jealous. Though Merlin knew why, Tom had never looked twice at him. He had only been interested in the power the Malfoy's had in the Ministry. Orion had been more than ready to write it all off as a schoolyard crush gone bad.

Tom had vouched for Harry. Harry, who could speak to snakes, a sure sign that he would be on board with their cause.

Harry, who it turned out had most likely convinced Tom to set aside all his aspirations. All the hopes and dreams of his followers. His Knights, who had stayed by him for so long. Tom's true and loyal followers.

The room was silent for a long time after Tom departed. It would not revert back to...whatever the room was when no one was in it, until they were all gone. The golden clock ticked, cacophonous in the silence. He should have been expecting the knock at the door, but Orion jumped all the same. Three sharp raps.

He rose and opened the door.

"Tom left fifteen minutes ago," Abraxas said, The Roberts cousins were behind him, looming like two smug shadows.

Orion sighed but let them in. At this point they were as welcome to the conversation as anyone. It had been Abraxas that led Orion to this crossroads after all.

"So," Abraxas took a free seat, careful to avoid sitting too close to the head of the table. The Roberts sat down near him. "I take it that I was right."

It was not a conversation that he was keen on having. It was bad enough to realize that Tom was slipping away from them. He really didn't need Abraxas there to rub it in. "It appears that your accusations were not without merit."

"What a diplomatic way of saying, 'you were right and I was very much wrong', you'll make a fine politician, Black." Abaxas leaned back in his chair, taking in the rest of the table. Everyone had switched their focus to him. Orion felt sick in the pit of his stomach. This was not the way everything was to have played out. They needed a leader, and Abraxas Malfoy was not it.

But no one else spoke up.

"My friends," Abraxas said with a sly smile, "we have some plans to make."

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"And we already have orders lined for half the products we brought with us," Fred laid another card down, stared at the pile and then picked another from the deck to stuff into his hand.

"Not to mention we've started developing several more items. You wouldn't believe how easy it is to get a hold of...less than legal, ingredients here." George tossed a card down carelessly, he didn't pick another up.

They were sitting in another hidden nook that the twins had found, something else that wasn't on the map. This one had a low table with several comfortable chairs and floor to ceiling windows that looked out over the nearby hills. Tom had gone off to his meeting and to keep Harry's mind away from what was going on there, Fred and George had whisked him off to play some mysterious card game. Harry still wasn't sure about the rules.

"That's great. I'm glad you two are really...settling in," he sat down his queen of spades and pulled a seven of hearts from the deck...were sevens good? He had a hand full of twos and fours...was he ahead? "The ball is this weekend," he said just to take his mind off the frustrating game, "do you have dress robes for it?"

"Oh don't worry about that," Fred said rearranging his hand, "we've been doing a little real estate shopping and found this bloke down in Diagon who set us up with plenty of clothes."

"Real talkative fella. French."

Harry winced, "that's great. Er, how's location hunting going?"

George smirked, "as it happens there's a shop opening up right next to the clothier. It's a good space."

"Big."

"Plenty of windows."

"And this Loup guy said he could talk with the owners to come down off the price," Fred's smile was down right feral, "so long as we bring a certain pretty vela around here and there."

Harry wanted to scream, to throw his cards to them to hex them both as they laughed. He buried his face in his hands. "Stoop, really! I'm not a vela. I don't know why he thinks I am. It's embarrassing. Get any other building, please!"

"No, I don't think we will," George said, cackling. "Really he's getting us a massive discount."

"I'm never visiting you. Just so you know."

"We'll see, Harrykins, well see." Fred tidied up his hand, "Alright then, time to addy up?" He laid his cards down. "A one, two fours, a five and a seven. Not too bad."

"Hold it there, hold it there," George laid his out, "I have three ones, a three and a five." He sat back in chair smugly.

"Er," Harry laid his cards out, "Two twos, two fours, and a seven."

"This really isn't your game, is it mate," George asked, still smiling like a shark as he pulled the small pile of knuts they were betting with close to himself.

Fred checked his watch, "Tom said the meeting should be over by six, we should head out before he sends out a search party for Harry."

"He's not that bad," but Harry started to gather up the cards all the same. He wanted to see how the the meeting went.

"I guess I'll see the two of you at the ball then." George stood and stretched, "I promised several housemates that I would help them out in DADA and Potions. You probably won't see me much for the next few days."

"Let me know if anything comes from the pixie bane fermentation."

"Will do." George said, tipping an imaginary hat before sneaking out of the nook through a false wall.

"Pixie band fermentation?"

"Oh it's perfectly safe, trust me," Fred took the cards from him and led the way through the false wall.

The halls were pretty bare at this hour. Dinner was over and either everyone was in the houses or in the library.

Or in secret rooms in secret meetings plotting against half of the magical population.

The common room was full when they arrived, the usual clutter at the study area and a few scattered groups in the chairs. Fred broke off to join a group of seventh years who were seated at a table in a corner going over notes. After a quick scan of the room Harry made his way to the dorms. Opening the door to Tom's room to find him sitting on the edge of the bed.

"So...It didn't go well?" He shut the door to Tom's room and went to sit beside him on the bed. Tom had been staring off into the distance, so unlike himself. He shook his head.

"It's going to take a lot longer than I expected to get them to see reason. I'm not even sure I can get them all to see it." He looked endlessly tired as he said, "I regret going against what I knew to be true simply to gain their support."

Harry rested his head against Tom's shoulder, "I know."

"How do you think it would go if I simply stop responding to their questions about the future?"

"Just ignore them?"

"Yes."

Harry took a deep breath, "I'm not sure. Eventually they would know you had changed your stance. Maybe they would go away...forget it. But."

"But there's a chance another of them will try to take up the mantle. And I don't think I can let that happen." Tom wrapped an arm around

Harry, pulling him into his lap as easy as you please. "I thought I had everything figured out. I thought my life was a golden road stretched out clear before me and all I had to do was walk down the path to victory. Then you came along...now I'm not certain I know myself anymore."

Harry snuggled into Tom's neck, holding him close. He could feel Tom's uncertainty thrum through their connection. "I know you. I see you, Tom. You're bold, and strong. The strongest wizard out there and probably the smartest. We can figure out how to untangle the plans you set up. And...if someone should decide to take up the title of Dark Lord and try to carry out the plans, well be ready. It won't be the same, because it won't be Voldemort doing it."

Tom breathed out a sigh, his shoulders sagged minutely, but Harry could still feel the worry there. Tom held him tight, and whispered fiercely, "we'll handle it together."

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Despite Tom's continued dance lessons Harry felt nothing but nerves as the night of the ball approached.

Perhaps it had something to do with the shift. The change in the air that seemed to follow him through the common room. He wanted to play it off as his imagination. But he knew what Tom had told his Knights, and he also knew how quickly gossip spread. It wouldn't be too far of a leap to guess that Harry Evans, transfer student and Tom's boyfriend, might have had something to do with his change of heart.

Alphard at least was the same. He was always there trying to cheer Harry up with a smile and some of his hidden candy, slipped to Harry as discreetly as he could during study hours.

He decided to only focus on one thing at a time. He couldn't worry about rumors that might be spreading around the snakes and the ball, so he chose to push his focus on the latter. The safer option. The one he could actually do something about.

At least dressing in Tom's room kept all the prying eyes off of him...well. All but one pair.

"Stop peaking."

"I'm not," Tom protested, though his voice came right from behind the screen Harry had conjured.

"I'm serious, Tom. I will hex you." He was nervous as it was. He had...well, he had never worn anything so...soft. In both color or texture. Or something so flattering to his size and build. He kept fussing with the lower collar, or the way the silk fell down his chest, the sleeves were longer than he was used to and the skirt of the robes felt fuller and swept the ground as he moved.

It was hard to not feel a little self conscious when he had never seen another wizard, or witch even, wear something so elaborate and still call it a robe.

This is a different time, there were bound to be others in similar dress. It was fine. Deep breath and walk out, it'll be fine.

"Okay, I'm coming out." With another deep breath Harry rounded the screen and came face to face with Tom. Who had definitely been taking peaks.

Tom's dress robes were quite a bit less flowy, and though the cut was far more sophisticated than his day to day robes, a green so dark it appeared black until one of the satin-like folds caught the light. The only embellishment that Harry could see was an oval pin of pure silver at his throat depicting a snake in filigree.

They were a long shot from the abysmal Lacey robes Ron had gotten a few years back. And here Harry had been thinking those were all the rage in this era.

"You're gorgeous," Tom breathed, he appeared to be holding himself back for a moment before rushing forward to-what could only be seen as fawning-over Harry.

"I feel over dressed."

Tom laughed, "It's a ball. You are dressed perfectly. And you will be the envy of everyone there besides."

Harry looked at himself in the mirror, he didn't feel particularly enviable. He felt like Fred and George were for sure going to poke fun at him. He twisted Tom's braclet on his wrist. He was fine, because Tom was there. They were going to go dance and have a good time

with their friends and then come back to their room.

Really he was being silly.

But out in the common room the chatter had that same edge to it he had been noticing since Tom's meeting with his Knights. He wanted to brush it off as paranoia. He wanted to take Tom's word for it that it was nothing to get worked up about. Feelings were hurt, but they would calm down eventually.

But it was hard to fully believe such things when Tom would walk a little closer to him, when eyes turned to him, no longer full of curiosity or even jealousy, but with mistrust and anger.

Fred and Alphard were huddled together near the common room entrance. They had become fast friends once Alphard realized he was friends with Harry too, and once Fred and George decided Alphard was the perfect tester for some of their new inventions.

They were both wearing dress robes, Alphard's blue and Fred's were a bright emerald green. They both turned as Harry and Tom approached.

Alphard looked at them dumbstruck for several long second, but Fred's face broke into a a broad smile. "Harrykins!" He started buoyantly.

"Don't." said Harry.

"You look divine! Doesn't he look divine? You look positively divine, Harrykins!" Fred stretched out his hands as though to touch Harry.

"Stop saying 'divine'," Harry said, brushing his hands away.

"Yes. Do stop." Tom said dryly, glaring at Fred until his hands dropped.

Fred held up his hands in surrende. "All in good fun, Tommi-"

"You will stop that thought before it finishes," Tom said sternly, pointing a finger at him, but Harry could feel his amusement and had to try hiding his laughter from Tom.

Suddenly things felt a little bit lighter. Tom was still Tom, and that was really the only thing that mattered. His followers were just a bunch of kids and if the Deatheaters couldn't fully take over without Voldemort, then there wasn't much they could do now either.

He took Tom's arm when he offered it, ignored Fred very lavishly offering his own arm to Alphard, and together they left the dorm and headed to the ball.

The ball was being held in the Great Hall. All the tables had been pushed to the far reaches of the room and were laden with food from dainty little finger sandwiches and grilled meat and cheese on skewers, to a rainbow of artfully decorated petite fours.

At the end of each table were row upon row of drinks. Some that sparkled with more than just carbonation in tall flutes, others shimmered otherworldly in short crystal cups.

The enchanted ceiling showed the snowing sky and was lit by the dancing of thousands of pixies. The floor was covered in some sort of magical snow that was neither cold or slick, allowing dancers to sweep around the room and never fear falling or disturbing the picture. And on the dias where the teacher's table usually sat a small band-Harry had no way of identifying-had set up. three wizards played silver musical instruments while a witch stood up front and sang.

There was no microphone. The muggle tech seemed to have not made its way to the wizarding world just yet. But her voice had been magicked to carry throughout the room.

It was so different than the only other ball Harry had been too. There was no press, hidden or otherwise, for one. It was just a fun dance for a bunch of students. It was still fantastical and lovely, but with none of the over top, showing off feeling of the other.

George met them in entryway and Harry was only slightly surprised, but no less appalled, to see him in bright yellow robes that matched Fred's in cut precisely.

"Tell me you two didn't go out and buy dress robes in your house colors..." Not that Harry was honestly surprised it was just...such a glaring shade of yellow. Like a giant, redheaded lemon.

George smiled and looped an arm around Fred, "It's about house spirit, my dear little poppy."

"I think he looks more like a camilla," Fred added cheerily.

"Oh, or a cherry blossom!" Alphard piped up, earning himself an arm over his own shoulder to be pulled into the other two.

"Well," Fred said, steering the other two towards the mass of students, "time to mingle. You two have fun now."

"Don't do anything we wouldn't do," George said, winking over his shoulder as they merged with the crowd.

"Fascinating," Tom said as they watched them go.

Harry just shook his head, "that's one way to look at it."

Tom led him out onto the dance floor with a fond smile. After their talk, after Tom's last meeting with his Knights, Tom had felt...lighter. When they had woken the next morning there had been a change in the link between them. That buoyancy carried on through the days after, and even with his own anxieties ramping up, Harry was happy to see Tom so content.

There were still eyes on them as Tom drew Harry close, placing a hand at the small of his back and hold onto one of Harry's hands with the other. But it wasn't the beady stares Harry had become used to in the common room. The Ball was open the sixth and seventh years, but they were able to bring dates from lower classes. Here and there a fifth year popped out of the crowd. Harry didn't even see another Slytherin for the first several dances. Not until Alphard scurried by, hands full of tiny cakes, furtively looking over his shoulder.

After a handful of dances, all of which Tom led Harry easily, all of which were surprisingly fun, they drifted over to a table to find some refreshment.

"You know," Harry said thoughtfully as he placed a few sandwiches on a tiny silver plate, "you were right. I am having a lot more fun than I expected."

Tom flashed him a brilliant smile, "what did I tell you?" he sipped from one of the sparkling flutes, "there was nothing worth worrying about."

"I suppose you're right," Harry balanced a few petite fours onto his plate and moved away from the table. They made their way into the relative quiet of the entryway to eat.

There was a smattering of small, circular tables set up there, all draped with flowing white satin spreads and hosting little evergreen trees at the center all aglow with fairy dust.

"I'm still, you know, concerned, about everything." They took a table just under the great hourglasses, Slytherin, because of course that was the one Tom chose. Harry couldn't hide a smile at it. Tom might not have machinations of ultimate power any longer, but somethings simply wouldn't change.

Tom took one of the sandwiches and sighed, though there was only understanding and patience through their bond. "It's been days and there hasn't been more than a few unhappy looks. I do wonder how those who have roped their adult relatives into the mix will fair in the long term. But, I don't think we have much to worry about now. Here. We were never going to make a move while still within the halls of Hogwarts. It's too risky." Tom leaned forward and smirked, "these halls actually do have eyes and ears."

Harry laughed, shaking his head. He took up Tom's glass and sipped carefully, but the drink was cool and bright, almost floral in taste with bubbles that popped on the tongue. He admired the sparkling bubbles for a time before sitting it back down. "I know. I do. You would know them best. I guess...I never liked being the centre of attention," Harry blushed a little, trying to not remember some the worst moments of his time as an unwanted celebrity. "I guess I was just getting used to being in the shadows."

"Give it a until the end of the year. Once I'm gone you won't be in the spotlight quite to much."

Harry scoffed, "how very conceited of you." They shared a laugh, Tom took another sandwich and after a somewhat stern look, so did Harry.

But something uncomfortable had settled into his stomach. He had been so caught up, first in seeing his friends, then their bond and all the anxiety of the Knights, he hadn't really thought about what would come after.

"Harry...what is it?"

He shook his head, "nothing worth worrying about now," he said with a smile, he hope it didn't look forced. They had time. A year was nothing and not worth ruining the now for.

Alphard and the Weasley's dropped by their table before they had finished their snack, and other than a few students from other houses dropping by to say hello to Tom and to look overlong at Harry. The lack of Snakes who came to them was stark in comparison.

But as the evening wore on Tom did his best to keep Harry distracted. They danced, Harry with his head on Tom's shoulder, Tom with a loving, if possessive, hold on him. They drank the sparkling punch, that Harry wasn't sure didn't have some sort of spirit in it. And strolled through the crowd, arm in arm, talking lowly and laughing at a shared joke.

As the evening was winding down, some time around eleven and only half of the party goers were still about, the two had wandered off to the far reaches of the entry hall, nearly hidden between a suit of ancient armor and a giant leafy bush in a large clay pot. Harry was nearly dozing, but they hadn't been ready to leave just yet.

That was how Orion found them.

Harry had his head pillowed on Tom's chest, Tom's arm secure around his waist as he rocked Harry back and forth to the distant music. In whispered tones he told Harry about the previous years' balls and get together. About how they usually gathered out on the grounds the last night before they left for the summer. Get the house elves to send them food and drinks and stay out all night. There wasn't anything the faculty could really do, it wasn't as though they could give them detention, they were all leaving the next morning.

Harry listened passively to it, he was about ready to tell Tom it was time to head back when suddenly a dark figure stood in the entrance to their little sanctuary.

He hadn't seen Orion for the whole of the dance. He hadn't seen any of the Knights, actually. But there he was now, dressed in pitch black robes that seemed to swallow the light, they were cut simply, if a bit stiff, with harsh lines and embellishments that brought to mind a military jacket rather than something one might wear to a party. He took them both in with dark, unblinking eyes, raking his gaze particularly over where Tom held Harry close.

"Orion?" Tom asked, his voice low and flat. Harry knew he wanted to believe his own words, but Tom had gone still within their bond, his muscles subtly grew tighter, as though poised for what was to come.

"Tom," Orion quickly moved his gaze back up to Tom's, placing his arms behind his back. There was something very battle ready in his stance too. "The Headmaster had a question for you, he sent me to get you."

"Dippet is still up?" Tom asked, there was a little push in the air

around them and Harry had to wonder if perhaps Tom wasn't trying to see Orion's memory for himself. He wouldn't be surprised, and yet Orion did little more than flinch at the sensation. "Well...I suppose I should see to it then." He looked down at Harry and smiled softly, "why don't you go get something to drink, I'll find you when I'm finished and we can head back? It shouldn't take long."

Harry nodded sleepily and let Tom lead him through to the Great Hall once more. He could feel Tom watching him as he crossed over to the nearest refreshment table. Everything was just as crammed full of food and drinks as before, and Harry chose one of the little cups of shimmering punch. It was blue with dancing violet and green glitter and it smelled like some sort of berry.

As he turned to leave the table someone raced by and bumped into him, causing him to spill a little of the punch. Luckily it was only on the floor. Harry spent a moment of frustration watching the dark blur that had hit him merge into the crowd and disappear, then he took out his wand and with a casual wave cleaned the punch up. Just because some people didn't have manners didn't mean he had to be rude too.

He walked back out to the hall, sipping his drink. It was less crowded out here, Tom would have an easier time spotting him and he wouldn't have to stand around a refreshment table like a dunce. He stood close to the corridor that led to the North Wing's downstairs lavatories. There were still plenty of people around so that Harry wouldn't be alone, but the dim light was easier on his tired eyes.

He was about halfway through the punch when he began to feel a little lightheaded. He brushed it off as being tired, until the light from the entry halls sconces began to dance in his vision. Then all at once he was hit with a swift wave of nausea, he nearly dropped his glass as he swayed away from the wall.

But then there were hands on him, and low voices. The cup was taken away and Harry was half carried away from the glaring lights. Wherever they were going was much cooler and darker, the voices and music of the ball grew thinner. Harry had a hard time holding onto consciousness. Everything swayed, his vision and hearing felt as though he had been plunged into the dark lake. But somewhere out of the dizzying gloom there were other yells, the distinct sound of shod feet hitting stone floor. But after several sharp flashes of red light, it stopped.

Then a voice close to him, it might have even belonged to whoever was holding him up, said, "we'll worry about it later, just take them with us," and then they were moving once more. '

It wasn't long after that that Harry lost his fight to stay awake.

The End

Chapter Summary

Tom finds Harry, and a bunch of unhappy Knights.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dippet, who had most certainly had more to drink than the sparkly punch, would not stop going on about what a great turn out the ball was this year. He had been talking about nothing else for a total of thirteen minutes.

When Orion had said Dippet needed him he had thought it some sort of ruse. There was a small part of him-miniscule, really-that wanted to say, 'but this is Orion, he is loyal to a fault. He can be trusted.' It had not been big enough to keep Tom from checking.

After all Harry was worried, and though Tom wanted nothing else than to assuage those fears, and he truly did believe the Knights wouldn't move forward with any plans while they were still at school, he had to agree that their anger could take a nasty turn if their combined focus was only one, unassuming wizard.

But Orion hadn't been bluffing. There was a clear image of Dippet pulling him aside to gush about needing to see Tom right away, nothing more, just rambling about the music and atmosphere and food.

Tom had had very little to do with it, he had relegated everything to the Head Girl and Prefects. They had been happy enough to pick everything out and run the results by him in the end. He had signed off on everything with barely a glance at what was going on.

Revelry hadn't been the most important thing on Tom's list lately.

"Headmaster," Tom broke in as Dippet was trying to turn the conversation back to the magical snow...for the third time, "sir, have you by any chance, seen other's of my house tonight?"

"Well, of course, my boy, of course," Dippet said, cracking a smile, he

patted at Tom's arm with a heavy hand, "always so nice, Slytherin house. Nearly the whole lot of them dropped by individually to say hello. So nice..." Dippet faded off after that, staring into the far distance.

Tom ground his teeth, his fists clenching at his side, eager and itching for his wand. Of course. Of bloody course! "If you'll excuse me, sir, there's something I have to see to."

Dippet jerked, his eyes clearing just a bit as he focused on Tom once more, "sure thing, my boy. Off you go! Suck a dedicated boy, so good. Going to do good things, that Tom..." Dippet wandered off, muttering to himself all the way.

Tom rushed through the Great Hall and out into the entrance where he had seen Harry disappear to. He swept through the entryway but...there was no sign. There hadn't been any strong emotions through their bond, and Harry wouldn't simply leave without telling him. He took a few deep breaths, trying to slow his quickened heart, and felt for Harry through their connection.

It was fuzzy, muted, as though Harry were underwater, unable to surface. Panic pierced him so fiercely Tom nearly had to clutch the wall for support.

Orion...

What had he done?

As though called forth by sheer thought, Orion was suddenly there, dark eyes boring into him. It was all Tom could do to not punch him right there in front of everyone.

"Where. Is. He."

"If you will follow me, my lord," there was no mockery in his tone, only stiff formality.

"Follow you? You're lucky I'm not cursing you right here and now. What did you do to Harry?"

Orion took a few steps away from him, then turned to look over his shoulder to Tom, "if you'll follow me, I'll take you to him." Then he said in a much lower voice, "the Knights have to settle something with the both of you."

Rage the likes of which he had never felt before boiled within his veins. He wanted to crack Orion's skull open and find the information he needed, he wanted to burn the halls down around him release some of the fury.

He could.

A dark, writhing part of him wanted to. It would be easy. Lose control, snap out and take down his prey to get what he wanted.

But...he didn't want to be that person. Not anymore. Not too long ago he wouldn't have given it a second thought. Now, though, he wanted to do better.

He could handle whatever situation that was before him. He owed it to Harry to do so without killing, or maiming, or the use of magic that was too dark to return from.

When Orion turned for the stairs lead up into the castle Tom stifled a moment of surprise. By the time they cleared the fifth floor he knew where they were going. When they turned left on the seventh floor corridor he was livid.

They had a majority of their meetings here. It was easier for the non-Slytherins to get to and Tom could make it into whatever he needed for the evening. It wasn't sacred like the Chamber was, and he had never forbidden his followers from replicating it on their own time. That didn't stop the spike of annoyance when they entered the room, now void of the table and chairs but still very much the Chamber inspired meeting place he had created for them.

All of the Knights were there, faces blank as they turned, as one, when he entered. He had been thinking of masks for when they left these halls, something to protect their identities and help stoke fear in those that would oppose them. With them all turned in opposition to him, he saw more than ever the force they could have been.

That they never will be, if he could help it.

He could not see Harry but he could feel him. His senses sharpening with proximity. He took the last thread of his resolve and held it tight. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Tom," the group parted just long enough for Abraxas to step forward, Tom wasn't even surprised to see him. "We called you here because we are concerned for you. We're worried."

"Where is Harry?" He snapped, if this rat was in charge of this...intervening, he wanted to get this charade over with as quickly as possible.

Abraxas frowned, then turned to the Knights, "did I not tell you? This obsession is beyond worrying. What do we know of this Evans?" He turned and the Knights all took a step aside. In the centre of the floor lay Harry, in a crumpled heap of pale pink silk as though he had been carelessly dropped to the floor. Behind him were two larger lumps, garish and instantly recognizable from their yellow and green robes.

More of the situation came into focus then, Harry had been attacked and Fred and George must have been close enough to try and help him out. Only it didn't quite work out. The twins were a force, to be sure, but Tom had worked hard to turn his Knight's into fighters. In a group they would be almost unstable.

"I know everything about Harry, I trust him, and that should have been enough for all of you." Tom took a step forward, he was over this. It was time crush this little ploy before it could go any further. But at his second step every Knight turned their wand on him. He growled in frustration, but there was little he could do...some of them were very quick with their spells, he would most likely not get very far in reaching for his own wand.

"We know that his name isn't really Evans," Abraxas continued, he walked around so that he could look down on Harry and still keep Tom within his sight, "I over heard him speaking to one of the Hanley's, which is not their real name either. What else is he lying to you, to all of us, about?"

Tom gritted his teeth, "I already knew about-

"What else is he hiding? What other lies has he told, what spells has he cast to lure you so far from us? You're loyal followers."

"Do any of you truly believe me capable of falling under a simple spell?"

Abraxas, of course, went on as though Tom had said nothing at all. He pulled his wand from his robes and pointed it at Harry, "let's find out, shall we?" He flicked his wand wordlessly, sending out sparks that landed on Harry.

Harry blinked his eyes open, peering around uncertainly, his gaze going to Tom before moving up to Abraxas where he loomed over

him. His whole body tensed, "you put something in my drink!"

Abraxas rose, wand still poised at Harry, he shrugged nonchalantly, "well I didn't, personally."

Tom could feel Harry's anger mirroring his own, then Harry glanced to the side and saw his friends and Tom almost felt sorry for what Harry clearly wanted to do to Malfoy in that moment.

Still at wand point Harry rose carefully, brushing off the skirt of his robes as though he were simply fixing his outfit after a brief rest and not as though he were kidnapped by a bunch of young dark wizards that had him at wand point.

"Is there a good reason you went through so much trouble to get us here? Or have you just never learned how to invite someone over properly?" Someone in the back of the room laughed softly but was instantly shushed by someone else.

"Now, harpy, tell us what you did to Tom."

Harry rolled his eyes, "nothing, he's fine. Just because you're upset that he, what? Changed his mind on something?"

Abraxas snarled down at Harry, knuckles white where they gripped his wand. "Not 'something', you. He has changed, because of you. You did something to him. You've tricked or deceived, or bewitched him, and now all our futures are in jeopardy!"

All eyes were on Harry and Abraxas. Tom carefully moved his hand to his wand in the distraction, he'd have to be quick but if he could unarm Abraxas Harry should be able to reach for his own wand....assuming they hadn't taken it from him. But before he could strike Abraxas lunged forward and yelled.

"I'll make you tell us all the truth! IMPERIO!" The curse, unblockable, hit Harry square in the chest. A ripple of apprehension passed through the Knights but no one made a move to step forward and stop the proceedings. Harry's bright eyes dulled as the spell washed over him, then he blinked and...

To anyone else it probably appeared as nothing, just the spell settling. Tom had studied the curse often. He had unabashedly used it on children in the orphanage. He had used it on muggles in the streets. He had even causally employed it to get other students to do his bidding here and there. For the most part those who were under the

spell never lost the slightly lost expression caused from the mind fog. And if Tom wasn't losing his touch, Harry didn't appear to be affected at all.

Abraxas seemed to think otherwise. He turned triumphantly to Tom, smiling brightly. "What should I ask him first, my lord? How exactly he bewitched you? Or perhaps we should learn a little bit about who he actually is first?"

Tom relaxed his grip on his wand and moved to cross his arms over his chest. "You can ask him anything you want, and he wouldn't say a word to you he hasn't already said to me. Go on!" If Harry really were cursed he would have no choice but to answer, and he would dearly need to keep the truth of his parentage and time traveling a secret.

Behind Abraxas' back, Harry winked.

"Now," Abraxas turned back to Harry, "why don't you tell us your real name, hm?"

Harry played the part marvelously, he blinked sleepily up at Abraxas and in a small, dazed voice said, "Harry Jameson."

Tom's lips twitched before he could fully control himself. It was, technically, not untrue.

Abraxas smirked as a murmur drifted through the room. "And, what exactly are your intentions towards Tom?" He must have thought himself so clever. Here it was, the big reveal that Harry wanted to swoop in and take Tom's power, or use it for his own gains. But Harry only smiled.

"I love him," Harry said, eyes bright, "I want him to have the best life possible."

Abraxas frowned, the whispering in the room turned heated. Tom took a step forward, ignoring the wands, though most had dropped considerably since Harry began to speak.

"I've changed, Malfoy. Me. Not because Harry has tricked me. Or because I am under any sort of influence. But because I saw...I saw what was at the end of the path we were headed down. And I choose to turn back."

Abraxas whipped around to him, nostrils flared and pale eyes wild. "This is all some sort of trick, isn't it?"

"Slughorn keeps a vial of veritaserum in his office to show those wishing to complete the potions mastery post graduation," Tom said, tilting his head and smiling brightly, "shall I go fetch it? We can put this delusion of yours to rest."

Abraxas floundered, looking around to the room for help only to find that there were no more wands pointed at Tom, everyone was staring at him now, waiting for his reply. "No!" He shrieked, his wand once more turned to Harry with threatening intent, "No, I don't accept this. How can any of you accept this? What about all our plans? You were going to lead us to greatness!"

"I was going to lead you..." Tom looked around at them all. So many of them would have died because of him. For him. And he would have eaten up their lives without a second thought, not even taking pleasure from it, simply seeing it as his due. That wouldn't happen this time...not because of him.

"I would have led you down a path we couldn't have come back from. A path that would have brought more destruction than glory."

"LIES!" Abraxas cried out, but he didn't have time to work himself into another tirade.

"Oh enough already!" Harry said, ditching his ruse of being under the curse. As Abraxas turned, shock clear on his face, Harry did something completely unpredictable.

He punched Abraxas in the face.

There was a moment of silence as everyone took in the bit of muggle-esqu violence, then two boys rushed forward, wands drawn and pointed to Harry. Tom had his wand up in an instant, hex on the tip of his tongue, but both boys were engulfed in long, writhing coils of rope. They fell to the floor next to Abraxas where he still lay. Alphard stood behind them, wand up and a sheepish look on his face.

Tom crossed over to Harry who was checking on Fred and George, both of whom seemed to revive easily and beyond looking annoyed and a little dizzy, appeared fine. Tom pulled Harry close and regarded the Knights. There were very few among them who would meet his eyes.

"Abraxas was right," he began, making sure to speak levelly and clearly. He would not be having this conversation again. "We do have things we need to settle. Now and for all. It's over. The Knights are

over. There are no more plans, there will be no missions. Any move made towards that future once we are out of this room is strictly on those who choose to do it. I do not support you. I am not your lord."

"But...all the plans we made..." Greenglass said disparagingly.

Tom shook his head. "It's over. I had my own reasons, different than the ones I gave, for making those plans. They're over now. Go and make lives for yourselves without them."

Tom turned to Abraxas as the room devolved into hurried whispers, the door opened and closed a few times as some of those more distraught found their way to sides of the room to calm down. Tom, for the most part, was finished with them. Anything beyond what he needed to do for them as Head Boy was completely over. Except...for Malfoy.

He had managed to pry himself up from the floor, but a large purple bruise was starting to form on his pale and pointy face. "I warned you against hurting Harry. You made the choice to ignore that warning."

"So kill me!" He spat. "Turn me into a blubbering moron. Curse me for all eternity. There is nothing you can do to me that will be worse than this!"

Tom smirked, "isn't there though?" He took a step forward, gleeful as Malfoy quickly took a step back from him. "I could turn you in. You drugged a fellow student, you used an Unforgivable curse on him. That is more than enough to get you expelled and your wand snapped. The Malfoy's don't have any other heirs, do they? They are sorely afflicted by infertility like so many other pure-blood families. How would your dear father, a great man who thought so highly of me, deal with the disgrace of his only child effectively losing his magic?"

"You wouldn't," Malfoy gasped, but he suddenly didn't sound so sure.

"Wouldn't I? What is stopping me?"

"I'll tell them. The Headmaster, the Aurors, whoever. I'll tell them about your plans. About all that you have done!"

"As far as I know," Harry said, coming to stand next to Tom, "it isn't illegal to sit in a room and talk to your friends. Even about...despicable things."

"Nor is it illegal to look up dark curses," Fred added, he, George, and

Alphard had gathered at Tom and Harry's backs, "so long as you don't actually do them."

"And we all saw you use the Unforgivable on Harry," George concluded.

Abraxas shook his head, he had gone pallid, all blood leaching from his face. Tom wanted to be a better person. For Harry, mostly. But he felt no remorse as he bundled Abraxas and his two cronies up with a flick of his wand and headed for the door, Harry at his side and their friends at their back.

They left the room, half full of ex-Knights, and passed a few stragglers in the corridors as they made their way to Dippet's office. They looked lost, scared, but they would find their own footing soon enough.

It was time they all learned to stand on their own.

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It was hours before they could leave the Headmaster's office. Such accusations, especially to an affluent pure-blood family were not taken lightly.

After the five of them had given their accounts of the evening, how Abraxas and the Roberts had drugged Harry, something Fred, George, and Alphard had all seen first hand. Only to lead them and Tom to a dark room where, after yelling like a crazed man for several minutes, he had used the Unforgivable curse to try and control Harry.

Abraxas hadn't had much to say in his defense, and in that time no one else made their way to the Headmaster's office to refute Tom's account.

The Roberts would just get a hefty slap on the wrist. Several month's suspension with the threat of a repeat year and detention for the rest of their school life. But there was to be a council to discuss what was to become of Abraxas Malfoy's future.

The sun had long since risen by the time they made it to the dungeons. George had forgone going to his own dorm and followed them to the hidden door to the Slytherin common room.



"What do you think this will mean...for Draco, for Lucius?" Harry asked as they filed through the carved door and into the quiet, green cast gloom from the Giant underwater window.

Fred and George just looked at one another and shrugged. "I suppose there's a chance that this Malfoy will marry the same witch, have the same child like he had before, but..." Fred ran a hand through his frazzled red hair.

"But," George picked up, "Lucius and Draco...well, I think curbing Malfoy's homicidal tendencies before he can try and fashion himself the new dark lord is more important than assuring the people we knew before were born."

"Especially when they were gits." Fred said.

"Especially when they were gits." George nodded.

"I suppose..." Harry said lowly. He looked worse for wear and fading fast. Tom took him by the arm and led him to the dorms.

"It's time for bed. We can discuss philosophy later." The others followed them down the hall, Alphard going into the sixth year dorm and Fred and George into the seventh.

Once the door was closed and locked behind them Tom went to work helping Harry get ready for bed. His dress robes were rumpled, Tom took a moment to smooth them out as best he could before folding them into the hamper for the house elves to handle. Harry managed to slip out of his shoes just fine but had started to crawl into bed with this glasses on. Tom clucked his tongue, but removed them with a fond smile. He pulled back the covers and helped Harry settle in.

"There we go," he said, smoothing Harry's hair back from his face and kissing him gently. Harry hummed in sleepy pleasure. "Go on and get some rest. I'll be in shortly. There's...something I need to do."

Luck was on his side as Harry slipped off to sleep almost immediately. The night had been long and he was probably still feeling some effects from whatever vile concoction Abraxas had given him. He needed his rest. But Tom had something he couldn't put off any longer.

The night, for all it's chaos and anger....and fear. Had been enlightening. It had put a lot of things in direct perspective for him.

How could he be expected to move forward when there was one very

large piece of the past keeping him tethered to that life?

The diary was where it always was, tucked into the bottom of his chest. Innocuous, precious beyond belief. He held it close to his chest and breathed deep. Breath, always seemed to come easier when he held it.

Traversing his path through the common room was easy. The upperclassmen were most likely still asleep from the night's festivities, and younger students wouldn't miss the opportunity to sleep in as well. The third floor was clear and Tom went into the girl's room, through the hole behind the sink, and down into the dark of the Chamber.

For the last time.

It was fitting to do it here. This was where it all started. Where, just month's ago Tom had laid on the floor, surrounded by flickering candles and the remains of one of the darkest rituals there was. The pain...the emptiness. He would never forget it. Or how, at the time, it had seemed like the only option he had.

Mere weeks ago Tom knew he had a better option. He had bound his soul to Harry. He had held him close, made love to him on this very spot. Harry had opened a whole world up to him.

It was good to do it here.

The circle was etched on the floor, and not for the first time Tom stopped to wonder what else had been committed here. What plans had Salazar Slytherin plotted. What had he really wanted to come of this place? Of Tom, or any other descendant he would have had.

"You would have despised me." He said to the gloom, to the ghost of his ancestor. "You would have hungered for my power. But me...a half-blood. My mother married a muggle." His laughter rang through the damp, stone hall. "I hope you're rolling in your grave over it."

Tom knelt in the centre of the circle, he...wasn't sure how to do this. He pressed the book to his chest and took a deep breath.

There was only one way to reverse a Horcrux. Regret. Wanting to reverse it with all of your soul.

He thought about Harry. About the future they could have together. About the life of terror and pain that Harry had lived. How that would

never happen now.

...He thought about the girl

Her name had been Myrtle and Tom couldn't remember much else about her.

He hadn't been there when she died. He let the basilisk out to run wild, trusting in the beast to seek worthy foes. But Myrtle hadn't been a muggle born or half-blood. She had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Whatever potential she had once had was gone, all because of Tom's mistake.

His fingered tightened on the book, knuckles white and shaking. Pain lanced, hot and white, through his chest, so very like when the ritual had taken hold.

For the first time he thought about what her life could have been and how, because of his actions, she would never get that life.

His throat was raw, as though he had been screaming for hours, his voice cracked and his chest quaked, it was hard to take a full breath, but he managed to speak. The only thing he could think to say, though it paled in the enormity of what he felt. Of what the situation called for.

"I...I am....sorry."

Everything went white....silent.

His ears were ringing and he couldn't feel his extremities. There was a pressure on his chest...not painful or heavy. More as though it were cold out and he finally found his cloak. Warmth seeped back to him slowly, and his vision cleared in blurry spurts. Eventually he realized he was on the floor, still within the ritual circle, on his side on the damp, moss slick stones.

Slowly he made to sit up. It took a few tries, he limbs felt oddly weak, though his senses were stronger than they had been in some time....since the ritual...

In his hands was the book. Or what was left of it. The pages were black, smoldering. They dripped a dark viscous liquid that could have been ink, but smelled of Ichor. It was slick, soggy, and hollow. It had once held half his soul, his most precious possession.

The pages shivered and began to flake away in his hands, clumping into bits and pieces like wet sand. He let them go, watched as they hit the small puddles of water that never fully dried, and simply melted away.

It didn't matter what happened to the book. It was empty. And Tom...

Tom was whole.

He laughed.

It echoed off the walls in crazed peels. It filled his chest and nothing had ever felt so good. So right. He laughed until his chest hitched, until tears brimmed his eyes. He laughed until there was no breath left in his lungs.

He laughed until the first sod broke through and he found himself bowed on hand and knee.

In the middle of the dark ancient chamber, where he had once felt such great and awesome power, Tom Riddle hung his head and wept.

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Abraxas didn't return to school.

Harry listened into enough gossip to find out that his wand hadn't been snapped.

Though he certainly deserved such a fate.

But it had been decided that he would gain the remainder of his education elsewhere. He supposed that as long as he wasn't around to stir up trouble for him and Tom it didn't matter so much.

He could still go on to lead the same life, for all Harry knew. Perhaps he hadn't changed so much of the future as he feared.

Tom said to not worry about it, and so, Harry tried.

Ever since that night Tom had been different as well. He told Harry the next morning that the Horcrux was gone. That he had reversed the ritual, though he wouldn't go into detail. Whatever it was had left him

changed.

There was a buoyancy to him now. The link between them shone with a great light, Harry hadn't even realized how dim it had been before. Through it he only felt Tom. His happiness, his love. His annoyance at fellow students who wanted his time, his pride when offers for internships came pouring during the second term.

The Knights had given up. Or they at least did not bother Harry and Tom directly again. It made the days go by swifter.

Fred and George soared among the student body, and through their connections with Gringotts and a few local vendors in Diagon Alley, had secured a location for their newest shop before the end of term. And as the days grew longer and warmer, everyone in their little group grew more and more restless for the break.

True to Tom's tales there was a small party of upperclassmen on the greens by the lake the evening before they would all board the train. Harry and Tom sat under a tree, back pressed to Tom's chest, secure in the cradle of Tom's arms. They watched the moonlight ripple on the lake, listens to the sounds of laughter and revelry around them. It was so much like their shared dreams that Harry found himself dozing off, only to jerk awake and be surprised they weren't actually in bed.

Sometime after midnight a dark figure passed in front of them. He stood in the shadows but did not approach. he didn't speak. After a few minutes he moved on silently back into towards the rest of the party goers.

Orion hadn't said much to them after the night of the ball. He had apologized to both of them for his part in Harry's abduction. Abraxas had convinced him to play a part, to assure Tom wasn't being tricked. He understood how wrong they were to make such a move. But he had not seemed happy about all the changes.

"He'll go into ministry work, at least for a time." Tom said, pulling Harry closer. "It's what his father wants."

Harry nodded, he hated the feeling that their little show in the Room of Requirements wouldn't be enough to snuff out everyone's resolve for this great future Tom had proposed. Orion was one of those with connections, who had family all over and in powerful places, who also wanted a world in which half-bloods and muggleborns were not allowed the same freedoms and powers as pure-bloods.

"Will you see him then?"

"Perhaps. The ministry isn't so large, our paths will possibly cross." Tom had taken an offer to work in the Department of Mysteries as a cataloger/intern. Not all of their work was classified. He wanted to study time travel, eventually. Perhaps some alchemy and whatever else happened to fall into his lap. He had disappointed quite a few prominent wizards in accepting such an estranged position.

"And...what about us?" Harry asked, though they had gone over it several times now.

Tom kissed the base of his neck, whispered an obscuring charm and smirked when Harry shivered. "We will go to Hogsmead like everyone else tomorrow," he kissed down Harry's neck, "then we will apparate to the Knockturn Alley, where we've secured the attic apartment over Borgin and Burke's in return for working there part time." Tom pulled him up to sit on his lap and even with the obscuring charm Harry took a quick look around to see that no one was looking.

Harry hummed softly as Tom's hands found their way to his bare skin. They were as warm as the night, and just as gentle. "I promised Fred and George I'd go help them with their shop a few days a week."

Tom's hum of acknowledgement sounded a little like a growl. Harry smirked.

"You know they found a nice little place on Diagon Alley, right next to Jean-Loup's place. You remember Jean-Loup, right?" Harry squeaked as the world tipped, suddenly he was on his back, Tom growling above him.

"You will not. Go there." He declared between forceful and breathless kisses, "Alphard is helping them, there is no reason for you to go there." Harry giggled even as Tom stole his breath with another demanding kiss.

Under the tree, obscured from everyone, Tom took his time reminding Harry why he'd chosen him. Swallowing his sighs and cries of pleasure, lavishing attention on him until Harry arched and moaned his name. There was nothing but love and desire in the bond. And red hot passion as Tom found his own completion, his teeth worrying gingerly into Harry's neck with a possessive snarl.

Harry gazed up into the tree as he caught his breath, Tom was still wrapped around him, kissing gently at the bite on his neck.

"And next year?" He said softly, "I'll be coming back here and you'll be

in London..."

Tom rose up enough to look at him, bodies still pressed together. He smiled, small, but sure. "It's just a year. And I'll come to visit as often as I can. We'll spend the weekend in Hogmeade together if we must. And after that," he sighed and wrapped himself back around Harry's smaller frame, kissing behind his ear, "after that we have the rest of eternity together."

Harry laughed, curling into Tom, he managed to pull an arm free to run through the soft curls of Tom's hair. "Eternity, huh?"

Tom hummed and nodded, "I thought I might try my hand at alchemy. You know, just to see what comes of it."

"Yeah," Harry said, looking through the dark leaves up, up, up to the bright and sparkling stars. "We have plenty of time to figure it out."

x

The castle welcomed her as warmly as ever. She had apparated near the Hogs Head and made her way by foot. The day was warm and bright, the rolling green hills a nice change from the grey and tan of London.

Students milled around, the last day of classes was never a full one, lasting just long enough to get assignments for the next year and say your farewells. Better to spend the last of their time at Hogwarts lounging on the grass or taking a dip in the lake.

They watched Hermione, in her flowing maroon robes and pinned up hair, as she strolled along the path to the entrance.

She ran into Nearly Headless Nick in the entry hall where he stood in silent contemplation over the hourglasses. She took a moment to notice that Slytherin and Griffendor appeared to have tied this year.

Odd.

After a quick re-acquaintance in which Nick tried overly to give Hermione a hug, he had pointed her in the right direction.

"He's taken to looking out over the grounds, of late. On the second

floor balcony next to Arithmancy class."

She knew it well. Or she had. It had been years since her stint at Hogwarts, but her feet, and the castle, got her where she needed to be. And there, at the rail on the second floor balcony, a figure stood, stooped, peering out toward the grounds and the students she had just passed.

His hair had grown, which seemed preposterous, it had already been so long. It was more white now than silver, and she noted that he held onto a short walking stick he certainly hadn't been using when she graduated. But when He turned to her, bright blue eyes gleaming, smiling brightly, it was like no time had passed between them at all.

"Professor," She greeted, and Dumbledore kicked his head back and laughed heartily.

"Oh not anymore! And it's about time, if I say so myself. But look at you! Madame Minister, I'm honored you took the time to come." He beckoned her over to the rail and she happily obliged. Hugging him tight, noting his thinness, if not frailty.

"I'm hardly in wild demand. Besides, it's not every day the best Headmaster this school ever saw finally decides to retire."

Albus cackled, leaning on the rail more than his cane, he looked out again. "I'll miss it, but it was time."

"So, what will you do now?"

"Oh," he ran a hand through his long white beard, "I thought I might travel. Go to the States, visit the East. See all the things I never got a chance before."

Hermione smiled and nodded. "You deserve it. For all you've done. It isn't easy, dedicating your life to so many others. But you know, I'll forever be grateful for your help."

Hogwarts had been a large and scary place when she was eleven, just learning that magic was real. She had been lost and friendless, but there was Headmaster Dumbledore and his club, uniting students with similar backgrounds and interests in the hopes of building trust and friendships throughout the school. She had been paired with a pure-blooded girl from Ravenclaw, a shy half-blood from Hufflepuff, and a muggle-born boy from Slytherin. They had studied together, cried together when things got too hard. They were still fast friends to this

day. She owed much of the joy of her years at Hogwarts to Dumbledore for that.

He smiled wistfully, "someone once told me to be more open. They showed me that it was good to trust others. I've been trying to be a better person ever since."

"I can't imagine you needing to be told that," she shook her head at the image of a self possessed and righteous Dumbledore. She couldn't see it.

"Oh, my dear, how things change. Ho now!" He turned sharply, surprisingly nimble for one in need of a cane, "what have I said about running in the halls? Mr Potter? Mr Riddle?"

Two boys who couldn't be older than thirteen stopped in their mad dash through the corridor. They peered between Dumbledore and Hermione with big, innocent eyes. One a warm deep brown, the other a violently bright green. Both boys had wild black hair and could have been cousins for all their looks. They stood close to each other and when they thought neither she or Dumbledore would notice, shared little smirks between themselves.

"We're sorry, sir?" The brown-eyed boy said, he clasped a library book in hand. "We needed to return this before the library closed."

"Mmhmm," Dumbledore hummed, his tone not truly believing. "That might be so, Mr Potter, but you have quite some time before that, and running in the halls isn't allowed."

"We won't do it again!" Riddle piped up, he was slightly smaller than the other boy, but held himself in a way that made him seem taller. Hermione rose a hand to hide her laughter as he fixed them both with a winning smile. "William said we shouldn't but he was so worried. It was such a good book and he forgot all about it until now. We promise to do better, sir."

Dumbledore looked close to laughter himself, but he managed to nod solemnly. "See that you do, Mr Riddle. Now off with you both. And be sure not to run where other professors can see you. Wouldn't want to start the fourth year with detention, would we?"

"No, sir!" They said together, and turned to flee, at a much slower rate, down the hall.

Dumbledore shook his head, "those two...and Devon Riddle...I had his

grandfathers, you know. Two of the best alchemists and philosophers to ever come from Hogwarts."

Hermione tilted her head, there was something there...She could almost....

"I think...I remember hearing about them." Something tickled the back of her mind. Bright green eyes and a friendly smile. A thin boy who looked haggard by life, full of sorrow. But brimming with love.

She shook her head.

"Sometimes, when I see them," Dumbledore started, only to shake himself all over much as Hermione had. "But it's neither here nor there. Just the ramblings of an old mind." He clapped his hands together and beamed that bright and youthful smile at her once more. "What do you say we go back to my office. While it's still my office, and have a nice cup of tea."

"I'd like that, sir." She extended an arm to help him, though he only took it for show, not leaning on her at all.

"Oh, shush, none of that 'sir' nonsense. Not anymore. I'm Albus. Retired school teacher. Ready to take on the wide world!"

"Of course, Albus." They walked slowly through the halls, taking detours. Albus would stop often to point out this or that spot, where he had met this or that wizard or witch. She was happy she answered his letter. Happy he had chosen her to be here when he left.

Even if she couldn't get those green eyes out of her mind for days to come.

Chapter End Notes

Well this is it. The end.

This is by far the most popular story I've written. I just get blown away by the kudos and comments. You guys are great!! And i hope you enjoyed the ending.

Tom and Harry get their happily ever after.

how do they have grandchildren? Well, I'm leaving it up to you. Magic, probably. But you figure it out. I know what I think. But I won't force it on you.

This was a complete non-traditional ABO, and again I'm sorry if this showed up the in the full ABO tags. I don't control that. But it was all about Harry's and Tom's bond and how that was very much like how I write my full ABO stories. Just without the words, and usually there's some oppression thrown in...for funzies. I hope you enjoyed it all the same!

As for Hermione...

So when Harry made the choice to stay he changed SO MUCH. And It's always been my belief that his parents got married so young because they were in the middle of a war and were targeted pretty heavily. If you think you won't have much of a life to live, you kinda speed run through life.

So, no Voldemort or deatheaters (even if we assume at least one person trying to rise up, they were squashed almost instantly) So there was no war, no danger of dying young. Even if James and Lily got married they wouldn't have necessarily had Harry. They could have had other children at other times without rushing it. We are going to assume, Harry wasn't born again. That the only version of Harry is the one living his best life with his husband Tom

They travel, they do magic and discover things.

They're probably sitting on a beach having fruity drinks and just enjoying life together.

(Will Devon and William ever find out that they're pretty much cousins?

Who knows.

It would sure be a surprise!!

Devon would have to go ask his surprisingly young looking grandfather's what's up with that.)

Hermione though does sometimes remember snippets of a life she didn't live. But for the most part she lived a completely different life. She's still brilliant and with things being a lot less hectic she turned her sights to other things than survival.

She's still fighting for equal rights for all creatures. She's just doing it through politics now.

Thank you a billion times for your support! I really hope you guys enjoyed the end!!

End Notes

Kudos and Comments are greatly appreciated and fuel for the muses that control this story!!

Let them know what you thought!

And thank you again for reading!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!